...HTS
AND
SHADOWS
EFFIE A
ROWLANDS
STAGE
DOOR

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

NOVELS
BY
EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS
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LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

BY

EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

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LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Chapter I

THE striking of the church clock followed by the bells summoning devout people to the early morning service awakened Hester Slayde from the very late doze into which she had dropped after an almost sleepness night.

She sat up with a start, and looked about her in dazed fashion just for a little spell, then she sank back on the pillow again. Outside it was a glorious morning. Her window was flung widely open, and there was neither blind nor curtains to shut out the light and air.

Giving a curiously sharp sigh, Hester rested back on the hard pillow and looked about her. She saw only what she had seen for a great number of years. The attic room, the shabby pieces of furniture, the discoloured paper on the wall; her few dresses hanging on the hook behind the door (for there was no cupboard in which to shelter them), the old stuffed arm-chair that wobbled uncertainly when she sat in it.

And yet, though the furniture was a mixture of painted deal, and broken imitation oak, and there was neither carpet on the floor, nor blind nor curtains to the window, the note of this attic room was spotless cleanliness. The floor had been scrubbed by herself only a couple of days before: the white cloth that covered the chest of drawers, that served as a dressing-table, had also been through her capable hands.

With the sunshine pouring in and the soft breeze moving the boughs of the trees at the back, the window made for beauty, and despite the sloping roof, the discoloured walls, the ugly furniture, there was a sense of home about it, and a sense of security. One cannot live for nearly thirty years in one place without feeling that one has grown into these surroundings until they have become a veritable part of oneself.

And the sound of the church bell had sent a rush of sudden trepidation through Hester. Even now as she rested back on the pillow, and brushed her grey hair well away from her forehead, it seemed to her amazing to realize that she had the right to rest in bed a little longer: that there was now no reason whatsoever why she could not occupy that iron cot bed for as long as she chose, or be looking at the well-known surroundings in a leisurely fashion, for was she not mistress of the entire house? Was not everything in this house hers to be controlled? to be used? to be dealt with as she liked? She laughed a strained laugh and the sense of incredulity pressed a little more closely on her.

"It just isn't all to be believed right away."

And then she got up quickly, and she washed and dressed just as she had

washed and dressed for those almost thirty years, and put on the old garb of servitude and pinned her neatly braided hair closely about her head. And then she stripped her bed and opened her door and listened. Not a sound was to be heard. It was an old house, and a big one. The rooms were not built one on top of the other in conventional fashion: they seemed to ramble about; one room leading to another as if they had been added on from time to time. Descending the uncarpeted flight of stairs that led to her attic room, these stairs creaked noisily despite the fact that Hester had learnt to tread so very softly. On the second floor here there was another uncarpeted staircase that led to more top rooms, and Hester paused to listen again, and as she realized that there was no sound from those top rooms she smiled significantly.

"I'll give them till this afternoon," she mused, "and then . . ."

She finished this unspoken sentence with a shrug of her shoulders, and moved on down the stairs (now carpeted) from the second floor to the first floor. Outside one of the doors on this floor she came to a standstill.

It had been her duty through all these many years to knock at that door at eight o'clock, and to take in a tray. Even now as she shut her eyes she let her thoughts work swiftly backwards, and she could clearly picture the old woman sitting propped up in the big four-poster bed waiting to greet her with a scowl, and ready with a sharp rebuke for some little fault she had committed. It was strange indeed to have to realize that that vigorous-minded old woman, with strength and purpose inscribed on her face, with fire still in her big, dark eyes, with authority dominating her whole person, had been swept out of life.

Perhaps there was no human being in the world who would have credited Hester Slayde with being sincere in the rush of almost piteous longing which possessed her as she stood outside that door to hear once again the sound of her dead mistress's voice, for the glance from those dark fiery eyes, for revelation of that arrogant proud authority which had ruled her these many years.

Her hand trembled as it lay on the door-handle, but she did not turn that handle, neither did she attempt to enter the room. Instead, with a little mist before her eyes, she passed down the corridor, and descended the circular staircase that led to the big hall below. Hester had always felt an instinctive sense of admiration for the spaciousness of this hall, for the noble lines of the curving staircase, and for the panels of old wood which lined the walls. She pushed open one of these doors revealing another of green baize and walked along a stone passage until she came to a second baize door that led to the kitchen. It was empty.

As she had shrewdly guessed, not one of those who had served old Miss Martingate had left her bed. It was easy enough for the woman who had been the personal maid and attendant to the old dead mistress of the house to read what was passing in the minds of the servants. They intended to show their feelings pretty clearly; in fact they had already done so, despite the fact that one and all had been left a small legacy.

But what was a legacy, they would argue, to such an inheritance as that which had passed into the possession of Hester Slayde?

Upstairs in one of those top rooms, bitter, jealous, contemptuous words were being spoken.

"A sly one, that's what I call her!" said the middle-aged woman who had been cook for the last eighteen months. "My, many's the time as I've

pitied her, and I might have kept my pity to myself! 'Struth, *she* knew which way her bread was buttered, she did!" And then she called aloud irritably to the occupant of another room: "Winnie! Get up and go you down and fetch me up some tea. And I'm going to have my breakfast in bed. I ain't going into the kitchen no more! Does she suppose we're going to wait on *her*?"

The servants' rooms were larger and more comfortably furnished than the one which Hester Slayde had occupied for so long, but they lacked the neatness of her apartment. There was a smell of stale scent prevailing in this cook's bedroom and a touch of rather shoddy finery scattered about. And the house parlourmaid, who was rocking herself in a chair, had on a dressing-gown which, if it had met the eye of her dead mistress, would have signified her being sent forth from the house within the hour and without the necessary character.

She was a good-looking young woman who had been compelled by the rules of the house to cover her hair with a kind of mob cap, but since life had gone out of old Miss Martingate she had paid a hasty visit to the nearest hair-dresser, and consequently she sat now smoking a cigarette with her hair closely cropped to her head.

"What are you going to do?" this young person inquired of the cook. "Of course we're none of us going to stay. But if we go at a minute's notice we'll lose our wages."

"Not me, I shan't," said the cook comfortably. "I think I know how to talk to our fine Miss Slayde! She'll get a few home truths from me, you see if she don't."

The house parlour-maid shook the ash of her cigarette on to the floor.

"Well," she said, "I'm just not of your opinion, Mrs. Trench. According to Barnsby, Hester Slayde ain't no fool! It seems queer, but he's got a great respect for her."

"Respect!" said the cook, making herself a little more at her ease in the bed. "Well, that's as may be, but I ain't going to be led by nothing that your chauffeur chap says. Of course he's a little tin god to you! He ain't nothing to me."

"Well, anyway," said the house parlour-maid as she got up and drew her dressing-gown a little more closely, "I'll back his opinion against yours any day. After all Barnsby's seen a bit about the world. Don't forget he was in the war."

"I ain't likely to forget that," said the cook. "It's shoved in my face a bit too often. And I suppose he did it all himself, too? Got the Germans to come to terms and all the rest of it. Bah! you're a fool, my dear, to let that chap tag on to you." As the other woman was leaving the room, she said: "I say, just give Winnie a push. It's like her impudence not to answer me."

Although she was considerably annoyed with Mrs. Trench for her remarks about her young man, the other maid did as she was asked. She pushed open the door of the kitchen-maid's room and then she uttered an exclamation.

"Why, she ain't here! She's gone! Took herself off and all on the quiet too! She's a nice 'un, I don't think."

"Gone!" ejaculated Mrs. Trench, and she got out of bed and marched furiously towards the other room. "Well, I'm blowed! If she ain't done a bunk. Showed the way for us if you ask me, Ethel."

"Well," said Ethel after a slight pause, "I don't know. You may do as you like, but I'm not going to run away. It strikes me it's a fool's game as we're playing. I'll bet you anything you like she's downstairs now in the kitchen cooking her own breakfast, and we'll get our marching orders. Instead of putting her in a fix, it's her as 'ull fix us! Besides, I don't want to go out too soon, it don't suit me," the house parlourmaid said. "She's bound to have some one in the house with her, so I'll stay on if she'll let me."

The cook burst out into angry exclamations at this remark, but Ethel withdrew. She had a room to herself beyond that small cubby hole occupied by the kitchen-maid, and once there she shut the door, and she dressed herself as quickly as possible. And what is more, she put on her black parlour-maid's dress, and actually wore her cap and apron. She had not come face to face with Hester Slayde since she had had her hair cropped, so she thought it better to cover up her head.

The cook heard her clattering down the stairs, and said some more angry things to herself. Then she dressed too. But she put on her outdoor things, and then began to pack up all that she had not already put in her trunk.

She was a hard-faced woman, with a complexion that spoke plainly of a very bad digestion. The fact that her kitchen-maid had departed, and that Ethel was playing what she called "a dirty trick," did not soothe Mrs. Trench's angry feeling, and by the time she had finished putting all her possessions into her straw holdall, she sat down and counted her money. There was, of course, the fifty pounds to come to her from the lawyers, but that would not be paid over just yet awhile. This set her thinking.

Perhaps, after all, Ethel was right? Even though it went against a decent body's feelings to have to cook and serve one who had been just an equal a short time before (in fact one who had been less than herself, for after all the cook is the most important person in the house), perhaps she was a fool not to stick on. One never knew! There must be something, she supposed, in Hester Slayde or she never would have got round the old lady in such a wonderful way. It wasn't like real life a bit. It was like a story one read in a book, a sort of thing that some people might dream about, but which one would never suppose could happen!

"What's she going to do with herself? Her with all that money? and this house? and the pictures and all the things that are in it? Well, I don't envy her!" Mrs. Trench summed up. "She's up against a nasty lot, she is! And quite right too. Why for goodness does an old woman want to go and leave everything she's got in the world to her maid? What about her own people? A bit stiff I must say for some of them. Enough to make them all fair sick, that's what it is."

Ethel had run swiftly down the back staircase and reached the kitchen in that way.

As she had surmised, Hester Slayde had lit the stove, and had put the kettle on, and now she was spreading a cloth on the cleanest end of the kitchen table, and was going into the larder to get bacon and eggs, and bread and butter. As she saw Ethel all dressed in her usual way, she first of all coloured hotly, and then she smiled. And then she said with unconscious irony:

"You're down early, aren't you?"

It was Ethel who coloured now.

"No, this is my usual time," she said. "Look here,"—she stood rather

rigidly in front of Hester—" you've got to say what you want me to do. Do you want me to stay ? or do you want me to go ? I don't want to go."

Hester sat down and looked up at the girl.

" Well, it's this way, Ethel, I don't know myself what I'm going to do. It's all so queer and mussed up. I can't believe as the dear old soul has gone. Oh, I know she wasn't very sweet tempered, and I've not had too good a time of it, especially late like ; but after all, Ethel, this was my home and she's been very good to me all these years."

The parlour-maid gave a laugh. " You've a queer idea of people being good to you, I must say," she remarked.

But Hester Slayde was speaking on almost as though she had to open her heart to some one.

" Well, you see, Ethel, I'm not like you. You've got your mother and father and brothers and sisters too. Well I haven't got no one ! I was just a stray, brought up in one of them orphanages, and a precious hard time I had of it until I come here to service." She caught her breath. " It's just whatever you want to do, my dear," she said then. " I'm so bewildered. We've got the place to keep clean, that's all I know. I'll do my share, and you can do yours. If you want to keep on with me . . . I didn't expect any one of you would stay."

" Well, Winnie's gone, and I'm thinking Mrs. Trench won't stay after to-day."

" Well, of course not," Miss Slayde agreed gently. " Why should she stay ? There ain't going to be no cooking done. What we want to eat, we can cook ourselves. I'll tell you plain, Ethel, I'll be jolly glad if you'll stay on, because, well, it's a big house to be alone in. That kettle's boiling," she added abruptly, " make tea, or coffee, if you want it."

" Ain't you going to have it in the breakfast-room ? " queried the parlour-maid.

Hester Slayde looked at her, and then she said :

" No."

" Well, why not ? " queried the other woman. " You always did have it in the breakfast-room. You never was in the kitchen with us, nor in the servants' hall neither. Why don't you do as you'd ought to do, Hester Slayde ? My, if I'd had your luck ! "

" Luck ! Luck, do you call it ? Luck ? " queried the older woman, and then she checked herself. " Well, never mind. No, I ain't going to eat in the breakfast-room. I'll have my food along of you in here. I've got a busy day in front of me, Ethel—a hard day, and I want company. . . . I want something or someone to give me a bit of pluck. I'd just like to know what you'd be doing if you were in my place, Ethel ? "

Ethel laughed heartily, and as she put the water into the teapot and moved briskly about the kitchen, she gave her views. These appeared to centre entirely in buying clothes, and jewellery, and going about in motor-cars (of course with Barnsby), and also going to one of the night clubs, and to a restaurant where they had a cabaret. Nothing very romantic or high class about Ethel's outlook, but a very natural one.

" Well, you see, it's like this way," said Hester Slayde, " I'm a bit old for that, ain't I ? "

" Well, how old are you ? " asked the parlourmaid.

The new mistress of the house sat and pondered.

" I don't rightly know. I'm somewheres about forty, I think. I was

ten, or maybe eleven, when I was took out of the orphanage into my first place. I was a nursery maid and a general servant, and I just went from one bad place to another till I had the good chance to come along here as kitchen-maid. And I don't know why, I'm sure, but the dear old lady took a fancy to me, and I've been with her ever since."

"Well, look here," Ethel said, "you have a cup of tea, and I'll boil you an egg. Say, Hester! I've got an idea. Why don't you consult Barnsby? It's true, as cook says, he's only a chauffeur, but he's a man with a head on his shoulders. He'll rise, he will. You're going to keep him, ain't you?"

"My dear," said Hester Slayde, "what would I be doing with a motor-car?"

"Oh, you make me tired," said the parlour-maid sharply. "Drink up your tea," she added. "Let's get going before old Trench comes down. And you stand up for yourself! Do you hear? Stand up for yourself! Don't let her go for you and insult you."

In a rough sort of way she showed kindliness to the other woman. It struck her as being very pathetic to see the tears come into Hester's reddened eyes. Dressed as she still was, in the garb she had always worn when she had waited on the dead old woman, there was nevertheless something arresting about Hester's appearance, something which Ethel had never noticed until this day. Perhaps it was the hair, the wavy hair; the neat head, the way that head was set on the shoulders, or else the soft gentle look in the blue grey eyes?

The docility, it might be almost humility, which was expressed, not only in the face, but in the movements of this thin, worn woman made an appeal to the parlour-maid, and quite spontaneously she went round the table, and as she put a boiled egg in front of Hester Slayde, she stopped and kissed the other woman.

The way in which Hester's hand went out to her and gripped her arm almost startled Ethel, and the expression that flashed into Hester's face was a revelation.

"That's good of you, my dear," the trembling woman said. "Thank you! I do need someone to show me kindness! I'm going to have a very rough time. I've to meet the lawyers to-day and it turns me cold. They mean to be very nice to me, Ethel, but oh, they do frighten me! And then you know there's all the family to be thought of, and all I've got to do for them."

"What on earth are you going to do for them?" inquired Ethel hotly.

"I don't know, I don't know," said Hester, "that's just what I don't know. Oh, my dear, you won't believe perhaps, but I'd have given anything in the wide world not to have had all this money! If I'd only known what was in her mind! I'd have gone on my knees and asked her not to do it. They'll say all sorts of things; they'll say she was wandering in her mind, when, poor dear, her mind was as clear as clear, and they'll be down on me. You can be sure of that. They'll say I feathered my own nest . . . and before God I swear—— "

"Oh, you needn't say any more," said Ethel. "Do you think I'm a fool? I haven't lived along of you for nearly two years without knowing what you are!"

And then Ethel put up her finger warningly:

"Here's Mrs. Trench," she said in a whisper.

Chapter II

To Ethel's surprise the cook entered, not garbed in her outdoor things, nor carrying any luggage. She had put on her white apron, and she was smiling.

"Good morning," she said, and then with an attempt at good fellowship, "what are you doing in my place? You didn't ought to be in the kitchen, you know."

"Oh, shut up!" said Ethel sharply. "Leave her alone. Don't you fret her in that way: she's got enough on her mind as it is."

"She's got enough in the bank, you mean," said the cook.

For answer, Ethel poured out a big cup of tea, and pushed it along the table.

"Sit down, and let's be happy if we can."

With just a little hesitation, Mrs. Trench obeyed.

"I suppose you know as that hussy Winnie's done a bolt?"

"I expected it," said Hester Slayde in her quiet way. "I paid her her full wages last night. She asked me if she might have them because she wanted to go to a new place as cook."

At this Mrs. Trench exploded.

"Cook! She! Cook! Good heavens! I'm sorry for the people what have to eat her stuff. So you give her her wages? Was you going to do that to me? and to Ethel?"

Hester looked at her in surprise.

"Why, of course, if you wanted this. The lawyers have paid out a certain amount of money to be used for expenses, wages and such-like, but the way you acted yesterday—well, I didn't suppose either one of you'd want to stay on here."

"You know," said Mrs. Trench, as she sipped her tea noisily, "I begin to see through you, Hester Slayde. You're one of the meek ones, that's what you are. If you're knocked down up you get and asks to be knocked down again, and if someone fetches you a swipe on one cheek why you turn the other. Well, it's a good game to play if it works out like as it's worked out with you! And I'm not denying that!"

Hester Slayde got up, and the gentle expression went out of her face.

"Mrs. Trench," she said, "I'm ready to pay you your month's wages whenever you're ready to receive them. I haven't any more need to keep you here any longer. I'll be in the library: I've got to go through the books. They've got to be given to the lawyers. Please put down anything you may have spent out, and I'll settle with you in full."

She turned as she finished this speech, and walked out of the kitchen.

And Mrs. Trench sat and stared after her.

"Well, I'm blowed!" she said. "Who'd have thought it? So she have got some spirit after all! Well, I've got my notice—has she given you yours? No, she ain't, I can see that," the cook added with a sneer. "You're a sly one too, you are, Ethel. Well, poor devil, she'll find you out in time. Here! shuv along that bread. And I'll have an egg, if you please."

Though she had spoken with so much dignity, and appeared to have had herself so well under control, Hester Slayde was trembling from head to foot as she walked out into the hall. The postman arrived at the outer door

at that moment, and as he put the letters in the box, Hester stood with her two hands pressed against her heart. She so dreaded all those angry, accusatory letters which she was convinced must reach her from the scattered relatives of the old lady.

Then, still trembling a little, she went to the letter-box and took out the correspondence, and then she walked through the hall to the library. This was the room in which the will had been read to her the day before; in which the amazing change in her position had been put clearly before her by the lawyers who had managed Miss Sophia Martingate's affairs.

There had been only three other people present at the reading of the will. One had been the doctor, whose name was mentioned for a bequest of five hundred pounds; another had been a step-sister of the late Miss Martingate, an aristocratic old woman, with a face that seemed to be cut out of marble. A personage was Lady Pannister, very dignified in her costly black garments, with diamonds glinting with the pearls about her worn neck.

And the other person had been Lady Pannister's grandson, Michael. He, too, had been in mourning, but he had evidently been bored beyond description at having been dragged into this legal ceremony. When he had caught sight of Hester sitting in the background of the library, he had gone across to her, and had shaken her by the hand.

" How are you, dear old thing ? " he had said warmly. " I expect you're about done in. You must have had a bad time."

And Hester Slayde had clung to his hand. She was so fond of Michael! The very few times in which he had come to this old house had been like bursts of glorious sunshine in her monotonous, drudging existence, and she had found herself hoping, even praying, that the old lady had remembered him very generously. He was such a dear, and money was so necessary for him.

After the will had been read, there had been a spell of silence. A little gasping sigh had escaped Michael's lips, and he had turned unconsciously in the direction of that still figure sitting in the background. His grandmother, however, had not given a sigh. She had broken into fury.

" This is monstrous ! " she had said hotly. " Of course this is not going to stand ! Everything left to Hester Slayde ! I for one shall instruct my lawyers to contest this will."

The man who had read out the last testament of Sophia Martingate had looked at Lady Pannister, and spoken very coldly.

" Your ladyship will do what you feel will be right," he had said. " I may as well inform you, however, that this will is perfectly in order, and that your step-sister knew exactly what she was doing, and what she wished to be done."

What might have been a very unpleasant altercation had been stopped by Michael Pannister. He had got up and gone to his grandmother. The doctor had already hurriedly taken his leave.

" Dearest Gran, *please*, this is a very big matter. We mustn't do anything in a hurry ; we must talk it over." And then he had turned and looked again in the direction of where Hester was sitting looking a figure of stone. " After all, I am glad for Hester's sake," he had said frankly. " It's been such a long life of devotion. Think of the care she has lavished on poor old Aunt Sophie."

His grandmother had answered him in low tones.

"You're mad, Michael; you don't know what you are saying! It's a disgraceful business. I really can't understand how any solicitors of repute could have brought themselves to have inscribed such a will!"

Then she had drawn her black draperies about her, and she had marched (there was no other word for it) sweeping past Hester Slayde with an expression that would have dealt out death to that silent trembling figure had power been given her to deal with this noxious creature as she deserved to be treated.

As he followed his grandmother, young Pannister paused by Hester and put his hand on hers.

"It will be all right," he said in a hurried whisper, "don't fret. Everything will be all right. Look here! I'll come to see you as soon as I can."

His grandmother had turned at the door and had looked back, and with another smile at the poor woman sitting stunned and frightened, Michael had hurried after Lady Pannister and had passed out of the room.

Then had followed a very new experience for Hester Slayde. She, who had always been in the background, a humble dependent creature to be sent hither and thither—a creature of servitude—had found herself approached by the two lawyers who were present as an equal, treated with the greatest courtesy and kindness.

"You must not let Lady Pannister's anger upset you, Miss Slayde," the elder of the two men had said. And he had put as much sympathy into his voice as possible. "She has always been very arrogant and difficult, as no doubt you know."

"Curiously bad mannered, if I may say so," his colleague added. That remark of Lady Pannister's touching the honour of the solicitors rankled.

Hester had got up and clasped her two work-roughened hands together; tears were rolling down her cheeks, and she was still trembling; it was with difficulty that she spoke.

"Oh, why did she do it? Why *did* she do this? I'll never get over it! Never!"

"Come, come, Miss Slayde," the senior partner had remarked. "You are, of course, greatly surprised; and this has taken you at a total disadvantage! But after all these years of close association with our late client, you should have been prepared to hear some very surprising facts; for Miss Martingate never did anything in a conventional way. I may as well confess to you now that this will was not drawn up by us, but was made by an outside solicitor—someone whom your late mistress called in, and who was employed merely to make the will and was given no other legal work." The lawyer paused briefly and then said: "Miss Martingate appears to have informed this gentleman that she was not going to leave the will in his possession; and as a matter of fact it was sent to us the night of the same day on which it was made. We have been in communication with this gentleman, and he is quite prepared to come forward and say that Miss Martingate was absolutely in her right mind. Indeed she seems to have impressed him with her strong will, and even to have had a certain altercation with him about the phrasing of one of the legacies. Therefore the suggestion that Lady Pannister should contest this will and attempt to have it upset is absurd. I only regret that our client should have found it necessary to employ another solicitor, for we have always served her to the best of our power, and we should certainly have studied her wishes in every possible way."

Hester had brushed the tears from her eyes with her crumpled pocket-handkerchief.

"Sir, I know that, and she knew too. I cannot make it out. I am just frightened!"

"Why, there is nothing to be afraid of, Miss Slayde! You will, I presume, desire us to act for you? Or have you anyone else whom you would like to employ?"

"Oh, please, please," Hester had said in her faltering voice. "Do all that you think is right. I have no one; I never had anyone in the world except Miss Martingate. Oh, I wish I had known! She didn't ought to have left everything to me, sir; it was not quite right! Oh, there is Mr. Michael, and there are one or two others who'd ought to have been remembered, you know."

The elder of the two lawyers, whose name was Warne, smiled a little grimly.

"Oh, yes, we know all about the other relatives, and we are quite prepared to have some very disagreeable moments in connection with them. But Mr. Bavart"—he inclined his head towards his partner—"and myself will know how to deal with them. As regards young Mr. Pannister, I am rather surprised he has been left out, and I regret that. But after all, he is young and has many opportunities of making his way in the world."

Then Mr. Warne put his hand on Hester Slayde's shoulder. "I am convinced, Miss Slayde, that Miss Martingate left you all this money and property because she knew that in your hands it would be dealt with justly and sensibly. Now let us go into important business."

As she sat now at the library table staring down at the household books, all that the lawyers had said to her, and the tangible comfort they had tried to impart, came back to Hester's mind. She found herself almost imperceptibly yielding to that comfort. Of course it was all extraordinary and very strange, and she had had only a few hours as yet in which to attempt to grasp the immense change that had been made in her life, but she was decidedly calmer although her dominant feeling at this moment was fear. She had always been afraid of Lady Pannister, despite the fact that there had been very few visits from that autocratic old lady, especially of late. Nevertheless Lady Pannister was the type of woman who could, as Michael, her grandson, said, "put the fear of the Lord into anyone," and she certainly had managed thoroughly to frighten Hester Slayde this day.

It was strange how her mind working backwards found little sparks of humanity, and above all of humour, and kindliness in the woman who was dead. She seemed to be drawing nearer, and closer to an understanding with Sophia Martingate, and perhaps something of the real purpose which had prompted the strange woman whom she had served so faithfully for so long to do what she had done began to filter into Hester's mind.

She found herself even faintly smiling as she conjured up the angry ugly feeling which the knowledge of her inheritance must have loosened among all the kinsfolk who had paid such lip service to Miss Martingate, and whom she had so openly despised. That there had always been something of an old feud between Lady Pannister and her dead sister, Hester Slayde now realized, but she frankly was surprised that Michael should have been passed over, because if there had been any one creature for whom Sophia Martingate had seemed to possess a feeling of real affection it had been young Pannister.

It was, however, a very fruitless effort to try to get fully at the meaning

of what had been in Miss Martingate's mind when this will had been drawn up, and all that Hester could do was to call all her courage together and to impress on herself the necessity for remaining calm and getting a good grip on her nerves. The little spur of dignity which had come to her when she had spoken to the cook lingered, and the real kindly human touch of sympathy which the house parlour-maid had shown was very helpful.

As she sorted out the letters that were lying on the table, there came a rush of colour into her tired white cheeks, and something like a gleam of happiness, for the first letter she picked out was inscribed in Michael Pannister's handwriting. Of all the numerous kinsfolk he was the only one who had ever shown her kindness, in fact he had been almost affectionate. Christmas time had always brought her a present from him: gloves or handkerchiefs, with a little note which had been locked away and treasured among the few odds and ends of things which until twenty-four hours before had constituted the only possessions Hester Slayde could claim as her own.

She tore open Michael Pannister's note now with fingers that trembled.

"Hester, my dear," the young man had written, "I do want you to believe that I am jolly glad the old lady did the right thing by you! Now listen, dear old thing! Don't mind a jot what other people say to you. I am convinced old Aunt Sophie knew what she was about. She had had good cause to realize the stuff of which you are made. Don't let anybody bully you. Keep up your courage and stand on your own feet. And if there is anything I can do to help you just let me know. Yours always affectionately, Michael." Beneath this, he had scribbled a postscript. "Of course Gran is furious! But you know what Gran is! I don't know why she should take this tone, because after all there was never any good feeling between her and Aunt Sophie. What *did* she expect? Well, where money is concerned, one never knows how to take people. Cheerio."

Hester Slayde lifted up this letter and pressed it to her lips, and then to her heart: she kept back her tears with a great effort. Kindness and thoughtfulness had always affected her. Her sensitive nature had been one of those things which had provoked her dead mistress to fly into rages with her occasionally. Miss Martingate had never been known to shed tears, or even to express conventional sympathy with those who were in her service, and she did not hesitate to let Hester Slayde understand pretty clearly that she was not going to have her maids "snuffling around" and upsetting themselves unnecessarily.

The majority of the other letters she opened were addressed to "The late Miss Martingate," or "The Executors of the late Miss Martingate," and these she put on one side to be looked at later. It was wonderful how quickly the news of the death had circulated.

There was one letter, however, addressed in a pretty handwriting sent from Paris which puzzled her. It had been intended of course for the dead woman, and Hester Slayde turned it over and over in her hand quite a long spell before she decided to open it. Inside she found a fairly long letter. It was addressed from an Institution for working girls, and there was something frank about it. At the same time it had been evidently written with a sense of the importance of the woman to whom it had been addressed. It commenced:

"Miss Martingate . . . Dear Madam," and then it ran:

"I don't know if you will remember my name? Of course you don't know me; we have never met. But I have always understood you were a great friend of my late father, Dr. Charlbury, at least he told me this, and he always told me that if I found myself in any great difficulty, and I turned to you, he was convinced that you would help me. I am unfortunately in that position now. My dearest father died a year ago in Italy. We were travelling about together. I acted as his secretary, and he was, as perhaps you know, always busily engaged in research, and in giving to the world the benefit of what he had discovered, this in particular in connection with tropical diseases. I knew that he was in failing health, but I was utterly unprepared to lose him, and ever since he died life has been a very terrible business for me. He was buried in Florence. I am afraid I must confess that the whole of the expense of his funeral was found by certain medical men here who were deeply interested in his work. He left me without any money, and I found myself compelled to take a situation as a nursery governess, a situation which was also brought about by the kindness of those who were proud to call my father their friend. I came to Paris with an American family. I am not going to tell you of all the misery I have gone through, but I will just come to the point. I found that though I had been engaged as a governess, I was really used as a maid, a sewing maid, and one who had to do any number of menial tasks. This would not have hurt me in the very least if only I had been able to give satisfaction. But I could never please my employers, and they dismissed me about a month ago without paying what was due to me and refusing to give me a recommendation. I made my way to this Institution, and here I have lived on charity. But now I feel that I must try and get something to do, and it was always my dear father's wish that I should make my way to London. I believe there is a certain amount of money due to him from some publishers, and this I must collect, but I am going to ask you (according to his wish), if you will help me? I don't want money. I want work. Is there nothing that I can do for you? Or do you know of anyone who would employ me? I have a knowledge of various languages, and as I have done a great deal of secretarial work for my father, I feel I might be able to take on some such post again. But I really do need help, and I beg you will, for the sake of my dear father, give me this help if it lies in your power." The letter was signed "Elizabeth Charlbury."

Hester Slayde read through this letter several times, and each time she came to the end of it she felt her heart beat a little more quickly. All at once out of a grey and gloomy sky there seemed to come to her a sudden gleam of light; almost a burst of sunshine. Sophia Martingate was dead; she could not send any answer to this plea for help; but she, Hester Slayde, reigned in Miss Martingate's place!

And all at once there came over her a rush of warm human feeling, a desire to stand forward and stretch out a hand to a girl who was in need of friendship, of comfort and of help. Only a little while before she had said that she was alone in the world and that she had no one belonging to her to take any interest in her, to share her sorrows and her good fortune. But now all at once it seemed to her as if life had opened out to her.

This letter from Elizabeth Charlbury took on a definite shape and brought to her the most extraordinary rush of gladness. Perhaps she may be forgiven if her first thought was of herself. If she could bring this young creature into her life, then she would not be alone! Here was someone

knocking at the gate as it were, and stretching out a weak hand pleading to be admitted.

She sat a while in thought and then roused herself.

This letter must be answered at once. She would send a telegram. She would not tell Miss Charlbury anything about the death of Sophia Martingale, she would just answer the letter and say "Come," adding that she would be sending money by post without any delay.

This realization that life might hold something big and beautiful for her steadied the heart of Hester, and gave her a rush of new courage. Moreover, as she sat back in the chair and looked about her, there came to her a very natural sense of reaction. Also a sense of awakening as it were from a very unpleasant dream. What had seemed so terrifying just a little while before developed now into a practical and definite certainty.

Her life servitude was ended! No more dependence; no more nervousness; no more empty longings; or fear of the future. She was established, a woman of position, a woman of means! A sense of gratitude bringing with it a rush of new feelings, a new rush of thoughts suddenly uplifted her spirit in the most extraordinary way, and in that moment she realized that she had made a great discovery. She had lived nearly forty years, and yet she had never been alive until now!

Chapter III

THOUGH he had passed the greater part of his youth with his grandmother, Michael Pannister really possessed a home. A long time ago he had ceased making efforts to bring about a good feeling between his mother and her mother-in-law. It was a futile and hopeless proceeding.

From the very first Lady Pannister in her autocratic and tyrannical way had set herself against the marriage of her only son with Marcella Brodey. She had of course intolerantly considered that an artist, a young woman living by herself in Chelsea, possessing a studio (painting terrible pictures, according to her idea!), had never been in any way possible as the wife of her son.

The fact was that Marcella Brodey had been a little bit in advance of her times. Nowadays it is a very ordinary thing for young women to live alone, to have their own flats and their independence, but when Edward Pannister had come into her life she had been obliged to confess to him, with a happy laugh, that her family had been so shocked at her Bohemian existence that they had practically washed their hands of her! But she had confessed just as frankly to the young man that this did not in the least trouble her.

"The world is large," she had said to him, "and my people live in a very narrow bit of it. At least I serve one good purpose, I give them plenty to talk about. And they evidently will never cease to be angry with me! I get letters every other day from one or another of my relatives, but I just put them into the fire, Ted, and go on with my work."

And Edward Pannister, who had been always inclined to an artistic profession himself, loathing as a matter of fact the place he had been obliged to occupy in an old and very prosperous commercial firm in the City, had always applauded her views.

Michael, when he grew to understand things, had not been very long in discovering that the only happy times that his father had had before his marriage, had been those spent with Marcella in her studio.

There had been a terrible upset when the news of his marriage had reached his mother. Lady Pannister had denounced Miss Brodey from the housetop, and she had predicted a most terrible future. As a matter of fact no marriage could have been more happy, and the advent of Michael had been all that the husband and wife had needed to make their union a complete success.

Perhaps because he had always been rather of a weak and nervous disposition, and also because he had never possessed good physical health, the estrangement between himself and his mother, and the knowledge that Lady Pannister continued to be so bitter in her condemnation of his wife, worked disastrously on Edward Pannister's bodily condition. This of course Michael never knew, but what he did know was that when his mother chose to speak about the old days (which was not very often because she had buried the sweetest part of her life in her husband's grave), the boy realized that if devotion, and love, and care, and sweetest thoughts could have kept his father on earth, he certainly would have been kept by the woman he had married.

So deep and so terrible was the grief which assailed Marcella after her husband left her, that she had felt she could not remain in England, and had rushed away like a mad creature. Even her child had been nothing to her in those days. Consequently and naturally she had fallen almost willingly into a kind of trap which old Lady Pannister set for her (and it must be confessed from the very day of his birth his grandmother had adored Michael) and had agreed to let her husband's mother have the charge of her boy until she came back again.

She was away for eight years, and when she did return she came with her second husband. The knowledge that she had married again had almost driven Lady Pannister into a frenzy. It naturally had widened the breach between the two women: at the same time it also naturally worked in with Lady Pannister's desire, and plan, to keep her grandson with her altogether; especially as his mother now possessed two other children. If she could have had her way she would have stood as a barrier between Marcella and her boy.

But when Michael was old enough to know a good deal about what had passed in his boyhood, he had in his winning and charming way set his grandmother's wishes at defiance, and had just calmly told her that although he would always belong to her, he also belonged a little bit to his own mother. And just as his father had done before him, Michael confessed more than once to a certain girl friend of his that the hours he spent in his mother's studio were very precious to him and that the happy-go-lucky kind of domestic arrangements which prevailed in his mother's home possessed an immense charm.

And Judith Winscott would nod her head and understand. She was one of the very few young girls who were encouraged to visit Lady Pannister's grand and austere home. Judith was a delightful girl, not particularly pretty, but according to Michael a real " pal," someone to whom a chap could turn and tell things, and be quite sure that his confidence would never be shared with anyone.

Judith Winscott was the daughter of a famous lawyer, and she had the privilege of being a god-daughter of Lady Pannister. Sir Henry Winscott

was a widower. Here again Lady Pannister had shown great disapproval when he had married, and she had never failed to congratulate her god-daughter on the fact that she resembled her father, rather than her mother.

The late Lady Winscott had been a light-hearted kind of creature, but had, according to Lady Pannister's opinion, been altogether the wrong wife for, and very detrimental to, her husband in his professional career, which as a matter of fact was a great mistake, because Sir Henry Winscott was one of the most famous, and one of the richest K.C.'s in existence.

But it pleased Lady Pannister always to believe in what she thought, and because Judith resembled her father so clearly she found herself being received as a welcome guest in Michael's grandmother's home. The two being just solitary children they drifted very close to one another. And it would have surprised Lady Pannister could she have known how much more Miss Winscott knew about Michael and his character than she did herself.

He was a secretary to a very big political business, and his grandmother was working and pulling all the strings possible to get him into a good diplomatic post. Not that she wished to send him abroad, for it must be confessed that he was about the only thing left in life that could give her a sense of happiness, but because she was very proud and ambitious for him.

It was because of Michael, and all that she hoped would come to him that she kept up any pretence of friendship with her sister, Sophia Martingate. The two women had never had the slightest suggestion of good feeling or understanding; in fact there had always been between them a sense of distrust, even approaching to hate.

And Sophia Martingate had been perfectly well aware why her sister chose to pay her periodical visits and what the purpose of these visits signified. In her own way Miss Martingate was fond of Michael too, but just because she knew how dear the boy was to her sister she never let herself encourage any outward expression of affection or sympathy for her nephew.

Sometimes Michael would say to Judith Winscott:

"I do wish my people had been human beings! You know what Gran is and now look at dear old Aunt Sophie. I believe in the year one there was something of a romance which went wrong, and that I suppose curled up all her good and nice feeling. But what an existence! Rolling in money! (You know she inherited quite a fortune from that old Bruce Starling.) Gran has never forgiven him for that though he has been in his grave for a long time, and yet, what good is this money to Aunt Sophie? What use is she? There she lives in that queer old-fashioned house, in that old-fashioned part. And she seems to take a delight in crushing the life out of everyone round and about her, especially out of poor Hester Slayde! Oh, I wish I had some money!" the young man had said on one occasion, "I tell you I'd just simply dig Hester out of that place. She is a thousand times too good to be bullied and sat on as Aunt Sophie bullies and sits on her. I'd like you to know her, Judy, but I suppose that's not likely to come about."

On the day following the reading of Miss Martingate's will, Michael rang up Judith Winscott on the telephone.

"I say, can you come out and have a bit of lunch with me? We'll go somewhere in Soho, nothing swagger. I want to tell you something and I want to ask you something. Is that a deal?"

Judith laughed and answered:

"Yes! As it happens," she added, "I'm free at luncheon so I'll meet you at Marini's little place. Have you got any good news, Micky?"

He laughed.

"Lord no, my dear! You don't suppose anything good or lucky would come my way, do you? No, it's just the other way about. I'm rather crushed and I want badly to be bucked up."

"Righto," said Miss Winscott, and her face was a little in shadow as she replaced the receiver on the telephone.

She knew perfectly well what Michael was going to tell her because her father at breakfast that morning had given her the story about the disposition of Sophia Martingate's money. He had been very severe in his criticism.

"It is rather a shocking state of affairs," he had said. "It's all very well, but I'm no upholder of these eccentric wills. What on earth is this poor serving woman going to do with all this money? It's an enormous responsibility for her, and I think she is an object of pity. She'll be run after by every kind of unworthy person. I confess," Sir Henry had said finally, "that I did imagine at the end old Sophia would have done something for Michael."

As she poured out the coffee, Judith had laughed faintly, and had said:

"Well, you know, father, I'm convinced that Michael never had any idea about that. Over and over again he has told me that he thought his grandmother was altogether on the wrong track when she played up to her sister because of the money. And what is more," the girl had added a little proudly, "I don't believe Michael will need someone else's fortune to put him on the road to success."

Sir Henry had laughed a little dryly.

"Oh, you young people! You're a little amusing with your romantic ideas."

At this Judith had laughed.

"Why, Daddy, you are always saying that the present generation of young people are much too go-ahead and practical. I believe you deplore the age when ladies fainted, and had to carry smelling salts and fans about!"

"Have it your own way," said Sir Henry good humouredly.

And then he had become immersed in his newspapers and the subject was dropped.

. . . .

Michael was waiting outside the little Italian restaurant when Judith arrived. There was a nice colour in her cheeks, and the usual glow in her eyes that always came when she met Michael.

He slipped his hand through her arm.

"Look here, dear old thing, we shall only be able to swallow a few mouthfuls. Before I came out I was rung up on the telephone by Hester Slayde. She isn't much use on the telephone, poor dear!" he added with a laugh, "because of course Aunt Sophie never would have one in the house, so Hester was speaking from a public call office. But she managed to let me know that she wanted to see me very badly this afternoon, and so after I have talked things out with you, I am going to trot along and find out what's amiss."

As they sat at the table, and he ordered the lunch, Judith laughed, and then she said:

"I fully expect, Michael, you will find yourself being called upon to do no

end of things for Miss Slayde. Poor dear, I feel frightfully sorry for her. Of course she has everybody against her. Even father declared it was a disgraceful business."

Michael nodded his head.

"Oh yes, I know it's going to be pretty tough for Hester. You can't imagine what the rest of the family are like. Wolves aren't in it. And of course they'll all turn to her and think they can get a bit out of her. Oh yes! I expect she'll want me to advise her, but I really don't know what to suggest. I would say, let her go away, or go abroad, or something of that sort, but she's never moved from that old house, and I am rather afraid of what might happen to her. Only just let the world get to know that she has such a nice big income, and there you are, you know! Look here, Judy, I think you ought to come in on this. I believe you would be a great help to Hester. I have told her such a lot about you."

Miss Winscott agreed.

"Of course I shall be delighted to do anything I can," she said, "but you'd better broach the subject first. I suppose you have not said anything to Lady Pannister about this telephone message?"

"Lord, no!" said Michael heartily. "I'm steering as clear as I possibly can from the subject of Hester. Gran is still fuming. I have not seen her this morning. Bolster, her maid, told me that her ladyship had had a very bad night and was going to stay in her room. I pretended that I had an awful lot of business to do, and said I should not be in to luncheon. Not that she would mind my lunching with you because you know you are one of her favourites."

The two young people chatted on, and discussed lots of subjects which were of mutual interest to them. And then Michael got up, glanced at his watch, and said:

"Well, I must be off. I told Hester I would be with her just as soon as I possibly could. Can you toot me over there in your little 'bus? I suppose you left it somewhere in a garage, didn't you?"

Judith Winscott nodded her head.

"Come right along," she said, "and I'll take you there in a jiffy."

When they reached the old-fashioned house in Kennington, Michael suggested that his girl friend should go in, and be introduced to Hester. But Judith hung back.

"No," she said, "I don't think I'll go now. Perhaps she is worried, and she wants to see you privately. You might let me know when I can go, and you can be quite sure, Micky dear, that there is nothing I won't do to help you, and her, if it is in my power."

He stood and waved his hand to the driver of the little car as she started and drove away, and then he walked up the rather deserted garden path and rang the bell.

There was a fair amount of ground surrounding the old house, but Miss Martingate had never taken the trouble to have it cultivated. She would never have flowers in her room, and whenever Michael had arrived with a few rosebuds, or something of that nature to give to Hester, they had always been smuggled up to her bedroom and guarded as though they had been the most precious things on earth.

Chapter IV

ELIZABETH CHARLBURY had not expected such a very quick reply to her letter, and her heart began to beat quickly when she received the telegram and learnt that there was money coming in the post.

She packed her things ready for instant departure. Though she had received great kindness, and those in authority at the hostel would have been very glad to have done all they could for her, she loathed the restrictions of this place, and in particular resented the fact that she was obliged to give a *compte rendu* of her doings and her actions.

She was a very handsome girl, in fact she was beautiful. Tall, slender, graceful, with dark blue eyes and hair that was black, except when the sun shone on it, and then it seemed to have copper gleams in it. Her face was delicately cut, and she had the clear white skin that one sees in Italians. There was, too, about her an air of breeding, she carried herself very well, and in an age when a great many girls slouch, and are perhaps too masculine and athletic to possess charm, she walked most beautifully. Altogether she was a very unusual and very attractive young creature, a fact which had already brought a good deal of trouble into her young life.

She had not been quite truthful when she had written that letter to Sophia Martingate, because she might well have remained with the American people, who had been really very kind to her. But she had started a flirtation, not only with the head of the family, but with both the sons, and it had been considered necessary by the female part of the household to dispense with Miss Charlbury's services as soon as possible.

As a matter of fact she had not been treated in the harsh way she reported, for the head of the house had found the opportunity of slipping a certain amount of money into an envelope and given it to her privately. She had, however, thought it wiser to come to this hostel for English girls rather than establish herself in a hotel, because she meant to play her cards very cleverly with Miss Martingate.

She knew from her father just a little bit about his old friend, and she had been able to fill the blanks which he had left. Undoubtedly there had been a great attachment on the part of Miss Martingate for her father, and Elizabeth intended to make good use of this. When a letter was handed to her in which was forwarded a certain amount of French money, the girl took farewell of those to whom she had turned on her arrival in Paris, and informed them that she was going at once to London.

This she did not do, however. She travelled as far as Boulogne, and there she established herself in the most expensive and most attractive hotel. It stood a little way out of the town, facing the bandstand, and was evidently a popular place with rich travellers, for there were any number of motor-cars arriving and standing outside.

Elizabeth Charlbury loved luxury and comfort, and she resolved to stay where she was for a couple of days at least. So she despatched a telegram to Miss Martingate, saying that she had arrived in Boulogne, was not very well, but hoped to be in London as soon as she was better. She did not think it necessary to add the name of the hotel where she was staying.

Consequently it was impossible for Hester Slayde to communicate with her again, and Michael had some difficulty in soothing Hester's anxiety.

It must be confessed that the young man had been amazed at the way in which his old aunt's late maid had turned to the thought of being helpful to this unknown girl who had come so suddenly into her life.

But he was very sympathetic, and as he told Judith Winscott when he rang her up late that evening, he saw in this a possible means of lifting Hester out of all the real trouble which his aunt's disposition of her money had signified.

"She is such a dear," he said. "I have told her that you want to know her. And she is very anxious to know you, Judy, so perhaps you might drive over to-morrow. She'll be ready for you, and then she'll find out what a real good sort you are."

Quite ignorant of all that was passing in that old house at Kennington, Elizabeth Charlbury thoroughly enjoyed her little holiday. She knew that she made a sensation each time she went into the restaurant, and, as a matter of fact, the waiters just fluttered around her as if she had been a royal person. And, naturally too, she attracted attention from the guests.

And on the first evening after dinner, as she sat in the lounge smoking and sipping a liqueur, a young man, who was ostensibly reading a newspaper near her, but in reality staring at her and almost audibly admiring her, suddenly determined to make an advance. He offered her the paper: it was the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*.

"Have you seen this?" he asked.

Elizabeth had a way of checking admiration which was not desirable, but she also possessed quick instinct which gave her the hint as from whom she could permit herself to have a certain amount of homage. She thanked the young man, and in a very few minutes they were talking together and laughing.

It was evident that this new acquaintance was blessed with a good deal of this world's goods, but he was at the same time by no means "fine fleur." That he was good-natured and jolly, and that he was quickly lost in admiration for herself was something which Elizabeth realized very surely.

But she as quickly discovered that he would have to be kept very carefully in his place. And when he proposed, as he did the following day, to take her for a long drive into the country, she refused, making it as an excuse that she had a great many letters to write as she was leaving early the next morning for England. She had discovered his name. It was not a very distinguished one, and Miss Charlbury had a very shrewd suspicion that it was closely allied with a successful trade of some sort.

But the hotel people fluttered about Mr. Gerald Briggs and he evidently dispensed lavish tips. In fact, he was rather inclined to swagger. He certainly had a very beautiful car, and also a very well-set-up chauffeur, and having really nothing to do that afternoon, Elizabeth allowed herself to be persuaded to let him drive her as far as Paris Plage.

As they passed through Le Touquet, with its crowds of gaily dressed people, a sense of life and enjoyment prevailing, Elizabeth Charlbury would have needed very little encouragement to stop there for a few days if she had not felt the necessity of getting back to England and coming into close intercourse with Sophia Martingate.

The elements surrounding her on this drive all appealed to her. She loved social life, gaiety, extravagance, and all that went to make success, but she was careful to dismiss Mr. Briggs when she got back to the hotel, saying that she was tired, and was going to rest before dinner. His queer way

of dressing jarred on her, and his manner was at times really almost vulgar. He had, there was no doubt about that, unlimited money, and by the time the afternoon of the second day arrived, he had drifted into an almost hopeless and foolish condition of love for herself.

The fact that she successfully managed to put a little barrier between them acted on Briggs as an added attraction, and Elizabeth came to a quick resolution that night that she would have to dismiss this young man summarily, otherwise he might possibly be a danger. She frowned as she was carried up in the lift to her room on the top floor.

Why were men so stupid ? And why could she not meet the right sort of man ? Gerald Briggs was decidedly not the type for which she was disposed to sacrifice herself. He was altogether too young, indeed little more than a boy. And she took herself to task pretty sharply and lavished a certain amount of condemnation on herself for having given so much of her time and attention to one whom she already regarded as being very much her inferior.

It was just another case of the American men all over again. And she gave herself an impatient shake. Though she could command so much homage, and draw love so quickly, Elizabeth herself was conscious that it was utterly out of her nature ever to know what love meant. In a half-hearted sort of way she had been fond of her father because he was a distinguished man, but they had never been in real sympathy one with the other.

And Elizabeth had an uneasy feeling that the reason why her father never would discuss her mother with her was because there was mystery connected with her mother, and that, in fact, in all probability she was not a parent of whom she would have had a right to be proud. This was only detrimental to Miss Charlbury in as far as it might interfere with the development of her future. She had not the slightest desire to meet her mother, or to know anything about her, but she did not want to have her mother sprung on her suddenly, and prove to be a very unsatisfactory and undesirable person.

A note was brought up to her as she was sitting out by the open window. It was a frantic demand from young Briggs that she should come down and speak to him.

" I'll be outside," he said, " by the monument, and I'll wait for you there. If you don't come to me, I shall come up to you because there is something I have to say to you, and it *won't* wait ! "

Pondering this for a while Miss Charlbury found it must be answered. So to her great vexation Elizabeth slipped a wrap about her, and went down the stairs slowly. She was glad to notice that the lounge was practically empty. It was a lovely night, most of the people had gone to the Casino, others were motoring, or strolling about.

As she came near, young Briggs went forward with both hands outstretched.

" I say ! " he said, " you've just made me go all to pieces ! I don't know what's the matter with me, for I don't often lose my head like this. But you're so wonderful, Elizabeth . . . and you *must* care a little bit about me or you wouldn't have done what you did this afternoon. English girls are so proper, you know, when they are by themselves. They don't drive about with boys unless there's something serious in it."

He had drawn her towards him and taken her two hands in his, and she

made no immediate effort to release them, being powerless for the time to collect her thoughts. Certainly she had been playing with fire, that was very evident, but she had not for an instant imagined she was going to have the slightest difficulty with this young "barbarian," as she called him.

"You are talking a great deal of nonsense, Mr. Briggs," she said. "And you know perfectly well that nowadays English girls, or indeed any other girls can go about the world just as they like, and no one finds any fault with them."

"I know this much," said the young man, "I'm not going to be made a fool of by you, Elizabeth."

He was still holding her hands in such a tight grip that she had great difficulty in releasing them. But she did release them; and then she got up, and she said:

"I came out here because I could not possibly allow you to come upstairs and make a scene outside my room."

"I'll jolly well make a scene wherever I like," was his reply.

It was evident that he had had rather too much to drink, and also that being so young and so spoilt, he was going to consider himself master of the situation.

"You give yourself no end of airs," he went on roughly. "And I suppose you're better born than I am, but you haven't got my money, that I'll swear."

"I certainly have no money," said Elizabeth in her cold way, "but I don't want money—at least . . . not money such as yours. And you must please understand that you are making a very great mistake. You are evidently not accustomed to any intercourse with social people."

"That's all right, rub it in," said the young man roughly. "I know my father's a tradesman, but he's an honest man, and he's worked his way up, and he's made a big fortune. And I can have anything I jolly well like . . . and I'll tell you straight out now, I'm going to give you everything I've got! I want you to marry me, Elizabeth. . . . I want——"

He broke off suddenly, for Elizabeth had laughed a cold, heartless, cruel laugh.

"You are really most amusing. Now I know I made a very great mistake. I should never have permitted myself to speak to you, or have anything to do with you. You are most undoubtedly one of the class of people who think that money can buy everything! Well, my dear Mr. Briggs, it is you are making a big mistake now! Money cannot buy my friendship. Now please understand that's the end of everything."

She got up and moved away quickly, and he moved as quickly after her. And this time he was not speaking roughly, there were tears in his voice.

"Oh, I say, I know I've done the wrong thing. I ought to have known you were not the sort to be bullied. Oh, Elizabeth—Elizabeth, please don't turn me down. Don't be unkind to me . . . I do love you so . . . I simply adore you."

Elizabeth Charlbury moved round sharply, and took her arm away from his hold.

"Don't touch me, and don't approach me again or else I shall have to appeal to the management for protection. You are simply a vulgar little boy who has to learn manners, and to realize your proper place."

With that she walked away quickly from him.

And the boy stood and looked after her, and then he went back and sat

on the bench, and he covered his face with his hands, and he cried. It was not merely the words she had used, or the way she had spoken, it was the sound of her voice: it cut like a knife. And just for a little while he gave way to an excess of pity for himself, and a sense of humiliation. And then after that there came a sense of sullen anger and resentment.

"A vulgar little boy, am I?" he said to himself. "Well, perhaps she'll know differently one of these days."

And after that he turned and walked swiftly along the parade, scarcely realizing how far he went, or how far he walked.

Elizabeth was trembling with rage and outraged dignity when she got back to her room, and it was some time before she could calm herself. She smoked several cigarettes and walked to and fro in her room. And then she stood by the window and looked out towards the sea. If only she could have gone immediately, she would have left for England at once.

It must be confessed she did not sleep very well that night. She felt that she had been playing with an unknown danger. The Americans had been men of the world, but this was a raw boy, full of his own importance, and evidently allowed far too much freedom; encouraged, no doubt, by his plebeian family to imagine that he had only to hold up his little finger and that he could have any woman whom he chose to admire.

She was not comfortable in her mind until she got into the 'bus and was driven to the boat. And even then as she stood on board the boat and stood looking at the town in the sunshine, with all the busy craft gathered together in the harbour, Elizabeth was quite prepared to find that her youthful admirer had not accepted his dismissal, but would appear and actually travel on the same boat as herself. But for once she was out in her calculations. The boat left punctually to time, and there was no sign of Gerald Briggs. So with a shrug of her shoulders, she dismissed the young man from her thoughts as the boat passed through the harbour.

Elizabeth had no fears of sea-sickness, but she established herself in a cabin just the same, because she felt it was better to impress people with the idea that she was not a nobody travelling by herself. She had sent a little note to Miss Martingate the night before, and had said that she was leaving by the morning boat and therefore she was prepared to be met by some servant when she arrived at Victoria.

But when she got on to the platform, and her boxes were conveyed to the Customs, there was no sign of anyone there to be in attendance on her. This annoyed Elizabeth extremely; she hated having to take all sorts of bothers herself, and she looked upon it rather as a bad omen.

Nevertheless there was someone waiting for her. This was Michael Pannister. At his suggestion Hester had ordered a car to be engaged and this was waiting, as he walked to and fro scanning the various travellers trying to find out for himself which of the solitary young women he saw could be the one whom he was to meet and escort to the old house in Kennington.

He had already remarked Elizabeth Charlbury. But though she was very quietly dressed in proper travelling garb, she possessed that unmistakable air of beauty and attraction which was destined to serve her to such good purpose in her immediate future, and Michael dismissed the mere suggestion that she could be the one he sought. Because he had gathered from what Hester had told him that he was to meet a very poor young woman who was in great need of help, and this exquisitely attired, very beautiful

young creature certainly could not have been the girl who had written in such a pleading fashion to his old Aunt Sophie.

But keeping his eyes open, he came across a big trunk and his quick eye caught the word inscribed on the label. The trunk was standing close beside Elizabeth, and as the Customs House man came along and asked her if she had anything to declare, she indicated this big trunk and told him that there was nothing on which duty could be charged in her possession.

Michael first of all just frowned a little, and then whistled to himself softly. And then he came forward and lifted his hat.

" Miss Charlbury ? " he said.

Elizabeth turned. She saw before her a very handsome young man, very well groomed, standing in front of her. Gerald Briggs' get-up had been rather a mixture of a horsey-cum-golfing suggestion. But about Michael there was just that little element of the well-bred, well-dressed Englishman which is always so attractive.

She smiled at him, and he almost gasped as he realized how extraordinarily beautiful she was.

" Yes, I am Elizabeth Charlbury. And you ? "

" Well, I have been sent to meet you," said Michael. " I am a nephew . . . my name is Pannister. If you're through we'll get a porter and get your things to the car."

" It was very kind of Miss Martingate to send you to meet me," said Elizabeth, as they followed the porter through the crowded platform to the car that was waiting.

" Well, as a matter of fact," said Michael in his frank way, " Aunt Sophie had nothing to do with it. It was Hester who suggested that I should come."

" Hester ? "

There was a query in Elizabeth's voice.

" Yes, Hester Slayde. She has lived with Aunt Sophie for a great number of years. I think I had better explain," he said. He got a little bit red in the face. " The fact is, Miss Charlbury . . . I'm afraid you will be rather surprised . . . I hope it won't upset you very much, but poor old Aunt Sophie died several days ago."

" Oh ! " said Elizabeth. She felt suddenly thrown back on herself. " But I wrote to her, and I got a telegram, and a letter with money in it."

The young man nodded his head.

" Yes, that was Hester . . . Hester Slayde. As I have said, she has lived for years with poor old Aunt Sophie. Well, the fact is," said Michael, floundering a little—" the fact is," he said, when he could get a good command of himself, " Hester Slayde has inherited everything that Aunt Sophie had to leave. And I must tell you, Miss Charlbury, that she is most keen ; she is tremendously bucked at the thought of your coming here, and she hopes that you will let her do everything for you that Aunt Sophie, I am sure, would have done if she had lived."

Elizabeth Charlbury stiffened a little.

" It is very kind of Miss Slayde, but I feel in a very false position. Did she open my letter ? "

Michael nodded his head.

" Why, yes, I suppose she has opened all the letters. She rang me up and she was in a great state of excitement about your coming. And I think she was rather expecting that you would come two days ago, but as it happens I think you made a wise decision, because if you had you might

have just got in for the funeral, and funerals are pretty dismal things, aren't they ? "

But Elizabeth was really annoyed, and in a certain sense disturbed.

" Oh ! " she said, " I suppose it's all right. But I wrote to Miss Martingate ; I didn't write to her maid."

There was a little tone in her voice which rather jarred on Michael Pannister.

" Oh well," he said, " wait until you have seen Hester, then you will realize what a dear good soul she is. I am awfully fond of her ; I have known her for ever so long. She is one of my favourites."

He looked after the traveller, put her into the car, got in beside her, and then they were driving swiftly away in the direction of Kennington.

" You know London ? " he inquired as they drove along.

Elizabeth shook her head.

" Oh no, I have not been here much, only when I was quite a little girl. Did your Aunt Sophie live very far away ? "

" Aunt Sophie was a bit of a character," said Michael in his straightforward fashion. " She loathed anything to do with society. She left the world, one might say, ages ago, and as she inherited a lot of money, and some property, including this funny old house in Kennington, she determined to live in this house, although it is as one might say ' Back of beyond.' "

He was becoming conscious that he really did not like Elizabeth Charlbury. She might be extremely beautiful, as she assuredly was. She might have manifold attractions, but she certainly, to his mind, lacked charm, and he was very much afraid that poor Hester was going to meet with disappointment.

However, he chatted away as lightly as he could, and when at last the car stopped in front of the shabby garden, and the still more shabby house, he helped out Miss Charlbury, and insisted on carrying her travelling bag up the path himself.

Just inside the door Hester Slayde was waiting. She was very pale, but in her eyes there was a glow, and round her lips there was a suggestion of a smile. Talking the whole matter over with Michael had just increased in her simple and loving heart the belief that the coming of this unknown girl was going to mean a great deal of happiness to her.

And then she had such a charming visit that afternoon from Judith Winscott. And Judy had managed to fall in so easily with Hester's views and thoughts, and had been so sympathetic that she was all strung up with eagerness to welcome her guest, who she was resolved should live with her altogether.

But as she opened the door, and stood there with outstretched hands, the glow went gradually out of her eyes, and the smile faded from her lips and her two hands dropped to her side. For there was about Elizabeth Charlbury an air such as she was accustomed to meet in Lady Pannister, an air of superiority, of arrogance which seemed to speak of an established character and personality, and was far removed from the poor helpless, lonely girl whom she had prepared herself to meet.

Chapter V

Thanks to Michael Pannister's charm of manner and easy conversation, the meeting between Elizabeth and Hester Slayde passed over better than might have been expected.

As a matter of fact the new-comer, despite her annoyance at having been what she was almost inclined to call tricked into a false position, was no fool. Even as she stood in front of Hester and put her hands into her two work-stained ones, she was remembering exactly what young Pannister had said to her—that his aunt had bequeathed everything she possessed to this former maid of hers.

It seemed of course to Elizabeth Charlbury the most incomprehensible thing for any woman to have done, but all the same, she very swiftly came to the conclusion that here was a very big chance open to her, and that she must make the best use of it. So she gave Hester a very cold little smile.

And when it was proposed that she might like a cup of tea, she allowed herself to be led into the rather bare, unlovely drawing-room, which it may be said at once had never been used for years by Sophia Martingate, but which in the fullness of her heart Hester had thrown open to receive her guest.

When Judith had called earlier that day, she had brought her a quantity of lovely flowers, and these Hester had placed in various old-fashioned vases, and opening the long windows that gave on to the shabby-looking garden behind, she had drawn a deep sigh. The gift of the flowers had come just at the right moment, she declared, and gave a sense of fragrance and sweetness.

She bustled away to hurry up Ethel with the tea, and Michael Pannister and Miss Charlbury were left alone. The traveller took off her close hat, and shook back her black hair. It was not cropped or shingled as the modern heads, but there was not a great deal of it, only it was dressed in a wavy sort of knob at the back of the small head.

Seen without her hat, and having the faintest suspicion of a smile, for Elizabeth had also quickly changed her views with regard to this young man, she really looked so lovely that she almost took Michael's breath away. And the first thing he thought to himself was: "Here is a wonderful study for mother to work at!" The next thought was: "How on earth is this girl going to settle down in this dingy old house?" And after that there came a flood of something like pity for Hester, for he scented enormous difficulties.

The young man found himself hoping that Elizabeth would not prove so disappointing as her first appearance suggested. He drifted easily into conversation with Miss Charlbury. Though Elizabeth of course was a stranger to him and also to London, she had wandered the world, it appeared, and was more or less cosmopolitan, and Michael found his first feeling of dislike melt gradually away. He encouraged her to talk because she had such a charming voice, with just the slightest suggestion of a foreign accent in it.

She questioned him a good deal about the late Miss Martingate.

"I must confess," she said, "I wrote in great fear and trembling, because after all, although my father had always told me that your aunt was a very great and dear friend of his, of course she didn't know me, and she might have snubbed me violently."

Michael was truthful.

"I dare say she would have snubbed you; that was Aunt Sophie's way. Whatever she was in the years gone by when your father knew and liked her very much, of late years she had grown very embittered. She was a cripple, you see, and her inactivity and ill health did not serve to sweeten her temper."

To herself Elizabeth said: "I have evidently escaped something!" Out loud she remarked: "I suppose she must have given this poor Hester a pretty bad time? Oh yes, do smoke," she added, as Michael took out his cigarette case. And then she shook her head. "No, I won't smoke until I have had some tea."

After Michael had lit his cigarette, he said:

"Well, yes and no. Of course Hester was very much put upon, as the saying goes; but at the same time, I think Aunt Sophie proved in the long run that she knew how to value a devoted and loyal helper. And I am frightfully pleased that she has done what she did, because I have a great affection for Hester Slayde, and she needs friends."

To this Elizabeth laughed slightly.

"Oh, she won't be without friends for very long—that is, if she has a great deal of money?"

There was a query in this last sentence.

Michael answered the query: "Oh, she's got pots of money! But I don't believe Hester will be very quick to accept new friends just because she is rich. It will be very curious to notice how she gets along. You can see that she is just a simple, sweet-looking, rather modest woman. They say money is a very destructive element. I hope it isn't going to spoil Hester."

Miss Charlbury gave a little shrug of her shoulders. This eulogy of an inferior did not interest her.

"We shall have to wait to see," she said.

And at that moment Ethel came in carrying the tray with the tea. At a glance she saw that Miss Charlbury was the real thing, and she understood something of the emotion and nerves which had strung up Hester Slayde to such a condition of tension.

"Well, things are being queer," the house parlour-maid said to herself. "I wonder why Miss Slayde thought she was going to have a poor down-trodden young woman? This young person isn't going to let no one tread her down, not she!"

She stood at attention after she had arranged the tea tray, and then she gave a message.

"Oh, Miss Slayde says would you please forgive her. She's got to deal with some business right away, and she thought as Mr. Michael Pannister would give you your tea."

Miss Charlbury just smiled and dismissed the maid, and then she let Michael wait on her. As she held out her very slim white hand to take the tea, he noticed that she was wearing a Cabochon emerald ring, surrounded with diamonds, a very beautiful piece of jewellery; and she saw he was looking at it.

"About the only thing my father had to leave me," she said quickly. As a matter of fact it had been a gift from the younger of the two American sons, and it had cost a very large sum of money.

They sat over their tea for some time, and she let Michael light a cigarette

for her, and they smoked and they talked. And at last the young man got up and took his leave.

"I have to hurry away," he said. "I've been out so long, and my grandmother is not at all well."

To himself he was wondering how his grandmother would regard this new arrival. He felt convinced that Elizabeth's way of speaking, her beauty, her manner generally, would appeal to Lady Pannister, but at the same time he was a little doubtful. The fact that Elizabeth's father had been a very dear and close friend of her sister would probably influence his grandmother against this beautiful girl. At the same time it would be a very interesting outlook, that which stretched before Elizabeth Charlbury in the immediate future.

He came upon Hester Slayde standing in the old-fashioned hall, and he just took her in his arms, and he kissed her. And he scolded her.

"Now look here, Hester, this is a bad beginning. You know perfectly well you ought to have come into the drawing-room and taken your proper place. Please understand I am not going to let you be so stupid. You have to realize your position . . . you are a very important person; do you hear me?"

Hester smiled up at him: her lips were quivering, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Michael, I hear you. But you mustn't try to rush me. I'm that nervous, I do assure you; I'm just trembling from head to foot!"

"Well, you've got to stop trembling," replied Michael, and he kissed her again. And then he said: "Now, don't let this girl frighten you. Of course she is what one might call 'high class' but after all she needs things being done for her, or else she would not have turned to Aunt Sophie. And this is where you come in. Now tell me, how did you like Judith?"

"Oh, Mr. Michael, I think she is a dear! Oh, what a sweet young lady! She has promised to come and see me very often. You know she brought me all these flowers. You know I love flowers. It seems strange to me to have flowers put about in this old house when my poor dear could not abide the sight of them."

"Oh well," said Michael as he picked up his hat, "all that is going to be changed. Look here, if you don't mind, I'll use the car. I promised Gran I would run in and see her, and I have to dine out. As a matter of fact, she doesn't know it, but I am going to dine with my mother." And then Michael Pannister sighed: "I wish all the world were like you, Hester. You are such a dear, you are so sweet, and so easy to get on with."

Hester took his two hands. "Oh, my dear, you've got to let me do things for you. I'd sooner do things for you than I'd do things for anybody else in the world, and you know it! I'll be very glad to be kind and good to Miss Charlbury, but no one won't ever come near you in my heart, Mr. Michael. You are the first person what ever gave me a kind word, or remembered me, or thought of me as a human being. But God forgive me! what am I saying? When she, poor dear, did so much for me! There, you mustn't listen to me. You go right along in the car, Mr. Michael. And look here, my dear, you have it as often as you want, that'll be my affair."

"Oh, I've got to walk," he said. "I shall get too fat if I drive in cars. Well, dear old thing, I'll see you perhaps to-morrow, but I don't know exactly, because I am being kept rather busy with my chief, and I may have

to go abroad with him. Now promise me you'll buck up . . . you'll buy yourself some nice clothes and you will begin to spend a little bit of money on yourself." And he whispered this : " Don't be afraid of this new young woman. She's got to mind her p's and q's, you know. After all it's you who can do things for her, don't forget that ! "

Chapter VI

GERALD BRIGGS had lost all interest in his projected motor tour. As a matter of fact he was the cause of some anxiety to his chauffeur, Durning, who acted also as his valet, because he drifted into such a very bad condition after Miss Charlbury had left for England. This chauffeur was not a very young man. He had been in Mr. Briggs senior's service for some three or four years.

And before the boy had started out on this tour, the father had put him more or less into the care of Durning, and asked him to look well after him, and to report if any troubles were likely to arise.

Gerald Briggs' father was a widower. He had loved his wife, a good, hard-working helpmate, who had died just as great prosperity came into their lives, leaving him alone with his boy and a girl.

From the first Gerald had been the source of some anxiety to his parents. He had been a delicate boy to begin with, and a backward one, and then when he had been put into the hands of various tutors he had suddenly determined that he did not want to have any more schooling and that he was ready to start out on his journey through life.

Had his wife lived, it is pretty certain that Mr. Briggs would never have given in so foolishly to his boy's demand for independence, and more especially he would never have been permitted to make Gerald such an extravagant allowance. But the father had no social aspirations for himself, and, if the truth be told, his heart was buried in his wife's grave.

And as a matter of fact Gerald became almost a problem too difficult to be solved by him.

And so it was that he had taken Durning into his confidence, and had let the other man know that it was not without considerable anxiety he permitted his son to go so far afield on his own responsibility.

Mr. Briggs, senior, was a man who had never had good schooling, and whose speech was rather common. But he was a fine, good-hearted man, really loved by all those who had worked for him, and a man who inspired respect by his straightforward dealings and his broad-minded outlook.

" Just keep an eye on the lad," he had said to Durning. " You'll know how to manage him if you think he's doing something as I wouldn't like him to do. The boy's bound to get into scrapes. I'd 'alf a mind to propose myself going along with him ; but that would never have done, I'm sure of it."

Durning looked into his employer's eyes and promised :

" I'll do my best, sir ; but you know Mr. Gerald's a bit high-handed. He's got to be managed carefully. If he thinks I'm watching him, why he's just capable of sending me about my business."

" Oh, you mustn't leave him," Gerald's father said eagerly and anxiously.

"I should fair get the wind up if I thought you wasn't with him, Durning. Just give 'im a bit of rope, you know. Don't expect too much ; he's nothing but a boy. Why, he won't be twenty-one until April. Oh, my Lord, what I would give to have his mother here! She always could manage the children . . . they're a bit too much for me."

And then Mr. Briggs had put into Durning's hand a letter of credit which was to serve him if any big trouble arose, and Gerald found himself coming to the end of his resources.

"And you will wire me if you want more," the father said.

He had called the chauffeur to his office, although he was said to have retired from the prosperous provision firm in which he had amassed such a fortune, and which comprised a number of shops scattered all over England. And he had sat pondering over his conversation with the chauffeur long after Durning had left him.

And then he roused himself, and went back in his car to the big house where he supposed his daughter would be expecting him for luncheon. But Jane was once more not visible.

It must be confessed that Mr. Briggs got on far easier with his daughter than he did with his boy. There was a touch of her mother in Jane. She was practical, clear-headed, and she took great care of her father despite the fact that, having made a number of new friends, she was out of the house a great deal more often than she was in it.

But there was good in Jane Briggs. And many a time when she had promised to go out, she rang up on the telephone and put off her engagement just because she saw how her father was depressed, and noticed how thin he was growing.

As he sat this day at luncheon, in a very large, rather sumptuous dining-room (the house had been furnished and decorated and looked after generally by a very expensive firm), and he had dismissed one dish after another, contenting himself with a plain cutlet and then some bread and cheese, the door was flung open and Jane appeared.

She had suddenly remembered, when she was lunching at a restaurant, that this was the day that her brother would be starting for his tour abroad, and in her very abrupt manner she had made excuses to the people with whom she was lunching, and had taken a taxi and rushed home.

As she came in, she went up to him and kissed him. Jane was not exactly pretty, but she was attractive. There was something bird-like about her, and she had caught the knack of putting her clothes on well, and looking really quite fashionable.

"Here I am, Daddy! I'm sorry I'm late, but I was kept. Have you said 'good-bye' to Jerry? Now don't look so mournful, dear old thing," the girl added. "What are you eating? Bread and cheese? Why, I ordered several nice things for lunch ; where are they?"

"Sorry, my dear," her father said. "I sent them away. But you can have them back."

"I should say I would," said Jane, and she walked across the room, and rang the bell.

And when the butler came in she told him that she wanted lunch. "And hurry about it too, Bowles."

Then she threw off her hat, and rumpled her short, rather curly hair.

"Now, Daddy," she said, "you've got to buck up. Don't look so down your nose. You've done the right thing. Jerry's sure to get into a

muddle, and if he gets a few knocks, that'll do him good. Of course you've spoilt him; everyone knows that. I've done my best to take the starch out of him, but he's only got to fall back on you, and you undo all I do. I thought he'd be here to lunch? He hasn't said 'good-bye' to me, you know," said Jane.

"Well, he couldn't be here to lunch," said her father in his gentle way, "seeing as he left early this morning in the car. I do 'ope, Jane, as it's going to be all right with the lad."

Jane threw a piece of bread at her father.

"Now, look here!" she said. "Slow off! You've got to come around with me, Daddy. There are lots of people who would like to make your acquaintance, and I'm not going to let you sit and mope. Of course Jerry will get into holes. He's the most conceited, swollen-headed young ass I've ever come across. Oh, I know he's my brother; don't look at me like that. I'm only telling you the truth . . . and you know it. You're such a dear, and you let Jerry just wind you round his little finger. My, I wish you'd give him into my hands; I'd make a man of him. As it is, he can't stick me, you know. Now, what shall we do this afternoon?" Jane chatted on, as luncheon was served to her by the butler. "Let's have a good long drive into the country."

Her father's face brightened; then he said:

"But didn't you say as 'ow you had to be at some bazaar, or garden party, this afternoon?"

"Oh, I told them I couldn't turn up . . . it's too much of a fag. Besides, I'm not going to leave you to-day. We'll go to Hindhead. You love that part, you know. It reminds you of when you and mother had your honeymoon in Scotland."

As she saw the tears gathering in her father's eyes, Jane went up to him impulsively, and put her arms round him and kissed him.

"Now buck up, dear old Daddy!" she said. "I'm here, and I'm going to take care of you, and that's that."

"I only 'ope," Mr. Briggs said, as she went back to her place, "as Durning won't let your brother know that I've put him more or less to look over the boy."

"Oh, you can trust Durning; he's a wary one. And he knows Jerry through and through. If you hadn't been sending Durning with him, I'd have gone along. I'll back myself to keep him in order, though I am only two years older than he is. But don't fret. Durning will look after him like a father . . . and perhaps a little bit more."

It was the knowledge that Mr. Briggs put such implicit confidence in him that troubled the chauffeur in the days following on Elizabeth's departure.

To begin with, his young master had suddenly developed a desire to stay in bed. He had returned from a very long prowl after that very unpleasant interview with Miss Charlbury, and the valet had been waiting for him, and saw at a glance that he was in a very inebriated condition.

It was not the first time that Durning had seen young Briggs in such a state, but it distressed him because he had a shrewd suspicion that something of an unpleasant nature had happened to bring this condition about. As a matter of fact the head porter at the hotel had spoken pretty freely to the chauffeur about young Briggs. He was an Italian, but he spoke English perfectly.

"Got your hands full, haven't you?" he queried. "Rather hot stuff, that young man, I should say! Gone off the deep end, as you say in England, over that beautiful young woman what's staying here. I suppose you've noticed that?"

Durning nodded his head.

"Yes."

He had noticed the attention that young Briggs was paying to Miss Charlbury, and he had not been at all surprised. But what did surprise him was that so distinguished a looking young woman had found it possible to accept any offer of friendship from Gerald Briggs.

As they had been driving to Paris Plage, he had wondered to himself whether he ought to come in, as it were, on this situation, because although Miss Charlbury was so lovely and so refined looking, and so delightful to speak to, she might, after all, be nothing but an adventuress, and she might also have got in touch with the knowledge that young Briggs was very rich as he certainly was very foolish.

He got the boy to bed that night, and Gerald Briggs slept late, so late that the boat had started for England before Durning went in to rouse him.

When he realized that the morning was so well advanced, and undoubtedly Elizabeth Charlbury had left, Gerald Briggs drifted into a very sullen and ugly mood: he could be very rough and uncouth, and he gave Durning a very bad time. For a day or two he refused to get up, and managed somehow or other to get very drunk.

And it was not until the chauffeur spoke to him straightforwardly and said that if he did not improve he would have to report matters to his father, that the young man found it necessary to rouse himself and to go on with the tour that had been planned out for him.

Of course Elizabeth had dismissed him from her mind. She never gave a thought to the fact that she might have done a great deal of harm to this rather uncouth youth.

But the memory of her beautiful voice and of her charming manner and her graceful ways remained with young Briggs, tormenting him, and always bringing back to him in resentful fashion the fact that she had despised him and had turned from him, which brought about a mental condition which was destined to work out pretty badly in the future.

Chapter VII

MISS CHARLBURY had not been twenty-four hours under the roof of that shabby old house in Kennington before she had come to the conclusion that it was impossible for her to remain there. There must be a big uprooting, she determined. But she would have to go to work pretty carefully, of course.

Perhaps because she was clever, or because she was really in great need of someone like Hester to be behind her, and also because she was determined to keep on good terms with Michael Pannister, she had dropped her very haughty air, and had adopted one suggesting a pathetic submission to the harsh conditions of her life.

She had probed Hester in the most subtle way, hoping to find out in

some manner whether the late Miss Martingate would have been pleasantly disposed towards her.

But although Hester Slayde had been well assured that there had been a big romance in her dead mistress's life, she had known nothing about the matter in detail. Nevertheless she always managed to assure Miss Charlbury that if her mistress had been alive, she was convinced Miss Martingate would have been more than delighted to welcome her.

"People called her hard and bitter, Miss," she would say when she spoke to Elizabeth. "But that weren't the truth. I'm not sayin' as she was easy going, I can't pretend as she was. But she had a heart of gold, Miss. No one knew how much charity she did but me. She were always doing something good and kind for people. Look what she did for me!"

Elizabeth just gave her a glance, and kept back a sneer with an effort. All she did say, in a subdued way, was:

"Yes, she was very kind to you, Hester. But I dare say you were good to her."

But though she played her part cleverly, and managed to impress Hester with the idea that she was more than grateful, and cultivated a very pretty manner, the heart of Elizabeth Charlbury was surging within her.

She loathed Hester! It was with difficulty she could be civil to the maid and she loathed this old house. She curbed her impatience with an enormous effort. It was almost unendurable to her to have to bear with these dreary surroundings when she was longing for the world and for full life.

And the one who understood her was Ethel, the house parlour-maid. Other servants had been brought in by Hester—a cook, and a kitchen-maid, and a housemaid, and naturally they all discussed Miss Charlbury according to their lights, and one and all had admired audibly the wonderful girl who had come to live with Miss Slayde.

"She's the right sort, and no mistake!" was the housemaid's opinion.

"*She* wasn't born yesterday, not she!" said the cook. "She's travelled a bit and she knows what good food is."

"She's a deep un," is what Ethel said to herself.

And somehow she felt very sorry for Hester Slayde. In a way she too was attracted to Miss Charlbury, but before she had come to work for Miss Martingate, Ethel had been in various other situations, and she was well acquainted with the type of young woman to which Elizabeth belonged.

"She'll never stick here," she said to herself. "And what is to come of it with that poor soul if she tears her away from this part of the world? Why, Hester Slayde she'll go all to pieces if she don't live on in here! It's like a bit of a play," Ethel mused. "I'd give a lot to know what Mr. Michael thinks of her."

As a matter of fact, Michael Pannister had no idea what he did think about Elizabeth Charlbury.

She both attracted and repulsed him. Like Ethel, though not with so much shrewdness, he guessed pretty clearly at something like the truth about this young woman, and it hurt him to a certain extent to realize with what a rush of real heart feeling Hester was disposed to do everything in her power to give this beautiful young stranger the best that money had to give.

He never knew how the news about the arrival of Miss Charlbury to the old house reached his grandmother, but she suddenly introduced the subject one day when he had returned from his office work to have a cup of tea with

her, and was standing by the open window, stooping every now and then to smell the big bowl of roses that stood on a table near by. He gave a start when abruptly Lady Pannister addressed him about Miss Charlbury.

"Do you go to the old house in Kennington?" she inquired. "I hear that Slayde has got some young woman living with her. Do you know anything about this, Michael?"

For one of the few times of his life, Michael answered this with a question of his own.

"How did you know that someone was staying with Hester?" he queried.

Just a touch of colour crept into the pale cheeks of his grandmother, and then she said:

"Oh, I know a great many things, my dear Michael, which I generally keep to myself." And then she added, with a little burst of acrimonious temper, "I am making it my business to follow Slayde's actions. That mad woman Sophie having put all this vast money into such ignorant hands Slayde needs watching. I call it a perfectly disgraceful thing that she hasn't turned either to me or to someone I should recommend for advice."

At this Michael smiled.

"Well, you know, Gran dear," he said, "you've always frightened Hester. She's terrified of you."

"I don't know why she should be terrified of me," said Lady Pannister a little hotly, "when she put up for so many years with Sophie's absurd temper. But of course she is a hypocrite!" the old woman added bitterly, "and now that she has all this money (for which she must have worked in a very sly and underhanded way!) she is naturally going about parading a show of grief for Sophie. That will was a most outrageous business, and I shall never forgive Warne and Bavart for not safeguarding the position."

Michael gave a little weary sigh.

It was the old story over and over again. The days went by, but his grandmother could not apparently be resigned to the fact that her sister had gone out of life, and had left her money to a stranger.

Lady Pannister caught the sound of that sigh, and she gave him a quick look.

"Well, I know you have a weakness in your heart for this creature Slayde, which is something I can't understand, so I suppose you go there sometimes? What is this girl? Who is she? Some one of Slayde's own people?"

At this Michael laughed outright. He flung away the cigarette he had been permitted to smoke, and came back and threw himself into a chair. It was a glorious summer day, and the room, though it was austere and rather stiffly furnished, was fresh and cool, and exquisitely scented with flowers, and his grandmother looked very handsome with her white hair, beautifully dressed, and the lawn collar and cuffs on her black dress which marked the mourning which she never ceased to wear for her husband, the late General Sir Robert Pannister, K.C.B.

"I've half a mind to bring this girl to see you, Gran," he said a little whimsically. "She is, I think, one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen."

His grandmother now looked at him very sharply.

"Oh!" she said, and her tone was rather icy. "Beautiful! Where does she come from? Who is she? How has Hester Slayde got hold of her?"

"Well, it appears she wrote to Aunt Sophie, and the letter came after the poor old soul was dead. Hester, of course, has been opening all the letters—the lawyers gave her the authority to do so—and this girl had written asking Aunt Sophie to help her. Her name is Charlbury."

He was looking at his grandmother as he spoke, and he saw that the aristocratic face contracted suddenly.

"Apparently her father, Dr. Charlbury, was a great friend of Aunt Sophie's," he hastened to say.

The cold lip of Lady Pannister curled in a sneer.

"Charlbury," she repeated. "So she is the daughter of Roger Charlbury! Well, she had a very beautiful mother, and he was a handsome man."

Michael paused an instant, and then he said:

"Then, Gran dear, if you knew Dr. Charlbury so well, would you care to meet his daughter?"

Just for an instant Lady Pannister paused, and then she said:

"Yes; can you bring her here?"

"Oh, I think so," said Michael. "Or would you write and ask her to come?"

"I would prefer to see her before I permit myself to have friendship with her," Lady Pannister said, and she took up her knitting, which summer or winter was always lying in a big basket close to her chair. "It will be rather amusing," she said, in a slow way, "to see Roger Charlbury's daughter. It's a very good thing for this young woman that she arrived when she did," she added a little bitterly in the same breath, "because I am perfectly convinced that if Sophie had been alive, *she* would never have given any heed to any plea for help from such a source!"

Straight from his grandmother's house, Michael Pannister went to his mother's studio.

He always found it comforting and stimulating to be with his mother. She was painting the portrait of a very self-possessed little girl all in frilly white. But the sitting was just at an end, and in a very few minutes the studio door had closed, and the painter was alone with Michael. Despite the fact that her painting overall was decorated with all colours of the rainbow, Marcella threw her arms round her son.

"Heart's delight!" she said. "How lovely to see you! Now, have you had your tea?"

"Just come from Gran's," young Pannister said, and he gave a little sigh.

"Well, in that case I expect you want something a little stronger than tea," his mother remarked.

But he shook his head with a laugh.

"No, I never take anything of a strong nature, except occasionally at night. Oh, mother," he said, "what a joy you are! What a darling! How human!"

"And how dirty," said Mrs. O'Malley.

The worst part about her son's widow's second marriage in old Lady Pannister's opinion had been the fact that she still carried on her work and had married a very hot-headed Irish journalist and literary man.

There was however between Michael and his step-father the warmest bond of affection and sympathy, and the elder son also had a great affection for his two young stepbrothers. As a matter of fact he adored them. He asked for them now, but his mother told him that they had both gone into the country for the afternoon with their father.

"So we've got it all to ourselves, Michael," she said. "And you're a darling, and an angel to have come along now because," she sighed, "well, because I'm a bit worried."

Michael looked at her sympathetically.

"Money?" he queried.

"Yes, and no. I'm worried because I'm not doing good work. Look at that picture, Micky. Isn't it the stiffest and stickiest thing you've ever seen?"

Michael walked up to the easel, and he shook his head.

"No, mother, I don't agree with you. I don't admire your sitter, but you have just got her to the life, precocious little baggage, I've never seen anything so young and so self-possessed!"

"Well, I'm glad you think it's good!" said Mrs. O'Malley as she lit a cigarette and stretched herself in a low chair. "But I'm not satisfied with it. The fact is I've been overworking just lately, and when one is tired and nervy one gets so critical about what one does. Have you been doing any more black and white sketches?" she asked her son abruptly.

He coloured.

"Yes! I'll have to bring them along one of these days and let you see them." He sat astride the chair, and he also lit a cigarette. Then he said quickly, "Mother!"

She looked up quickly.

"Darling, what is it?"

"Well, I'm a bit worried too. It's about Hester Slayde."

"What, old Sophie's maid who has inherited everything she had to leave? Why on earth should you be worried about her?"

Michael caught his breath.

"Well, money isn't everything, you know, although it's a great possession. I'm worried about Hester because she is such a dear, good soul, and I am afraid she is going to have a lot of trouble."

"Well, my dear, she's got the stuff to pay for trouble and buy it off, you know," said Mrs. O'Malley dryly.

She was looking rather tired and white, but very attractive, at any rate to her son's eyes, despite her paint-soiled overall. She had such beautiful eyes and such a sweet smile, and with her hair all ruffled, and her thin slender artistic hand holding a cigarette, she made a picture.

"You mustn't get cynical, Mummy darling," the young man said. "I get quite enough of cynicisms and ugly feelings with Gran. When I come to you I want something human and live, and comforting!"

"Come and kiss me," said his mother.

He got up from the chair, went across, knelt beside her and kissed her several times. There were tears in her eyes when she looked up at him.

"Oh, you are so like Ted, sometimes!" she said in a low voice. "Micky dear, I just adore you! Now what is it? What can I do? Is there something you would like me to do? Just open your heart, dear lad. It will do me good to hear someone else's troubles instead of brooding over my own."

And as he went back to the chair, and sat astride it once again, Michael gave her the whole story of Hester's present condition.

And as he spoke about Elizabeth Charlbury, his mother gave him a very quick glance, which he did not catch.

"So this dear soul, Hester, has opened her heart and her home, and has

taken in a stranger, and a very lovely young woman? Well, that sounds romantic, Micky. Why are you anxious?"

"I don't know," the young man said, as he flung away the end of his cigarette. "I just have a queer sort of feeling that it isn't going to pan out quite right for Hester. And I don't want Hester to be hurt! I'm awfully fond of Hester; you know that, Mummie."

"Well, of course you're fond of Hester. I don't see her often, but a long time ago I knew her as one of the salt of the earth. And if you want me to do anything, why, Micky, speak right out, and I'll do what I can."

"Well, what I've got at the back of my mind is this—and Judith Winscott is of my opinion too," he added quickly.

"Oh, so you've got Judith on the scene, too, have you?" said Mrs. O'Malley. "Well, Judith is a very clear-headed girl. And what does she think?"

"She thinks just as I do. She's been to see Hester twice since Miss Charlbury has been there. By the way, mother," Michael added quickly, "did my father ever speak to you about a Dr. Charlbury?"

His mother nodded her head, and settled herself a little more comfortably in the low chair.

"Oh yes," she said. "Roger Charlbury was the man who made all the bother years ago between your old aunt and your grandmother. They were both in love with him! But if he had a special liking, it was for old Sophie; not for Lady Pannister."

"Oh!" said Michael, "so that's the way the wind blows, is it? I thought there was some reason why Gran was so funny when she spoke about him to-day. Did you know him, mother?"

"Oh yes! He and Ted were great friends. He was a splendid, handsome man. Wait a bit," said Mrs. O'Malley. She got up with the cigarette in her mouth, went across the room to a cupboard. Here she pulled out a very big case containing a number of unframed pictures. "I made several studies of Roger Charlbury," she explained. "He was a most striking-looking man, possessing that most extraordinary spell of fascination which appeals to a certain type of woman! They went for him just like flies go to a honey-pot!" She was turning over the papers rapidly as she spoke, and suddenly she pulled out a number of drawings in charcoal. "There he is," she said. "Is his girl like him?"

"Yes, and no," said Michael, after he had looked almost eagerly at the studies. "You are right, mother," he added, "he must have been a handsome, even a beautiful man."

"Yes, and he made a beautiful mess of things," said Mrs. O'Malley in the same dry way. "I've always believed, Micky, that your grandmother (and may I be forgiven if I wrong her!) made all the mischief between Charlbury and her sister. Anyway, the attachment came to an end suddenly, and he went off abroad. And the next thing we heard was that he had married some Italian or Spanish woman. Ted saw her once, and said she was extraordinarily beautiful. And that was some years after they had been married, you know."

As he stood holding the charcoal drawings in his hand Michael gave a little sigh.

"Poor old Aunt Sophie!" he said. "But she wasn't rich in those days, was she?"

"Oh! there was always a certain amount of money," his mother answered.

"But of course she was not really rich until she inherited all old man Berridge's money. That was a bitter blow to your grandmother. She had paid such court to Philip Berridge, queer old soul! But he always had a soft spot in his heart for Sophie and so he left her all he had. I don't mind telling you, Micky dear, that I expect Lady Pannister had an awful setback over her sister's will. She's always been keen after money, you know."

Michael put down the drawings, and spoke a little irritably.

"But heavens above, what did she expect? And after all she doesn't need money. Gran's got heaps of her own."

"People who have money always want more," said Mrs. O'Malley shrewdly. "As for me, Micky darling, I don't care a snap of a finger for money, only one's bound to have a certain amount."

Michael went up to his mother, and took her in his arms.

"And I'm such a dud," he said, "Look at me! I don't earn enough to keep myself in cigarettes. I wish I'd been brought up to some real business, mother!"

"But your grandmother gives you an allowance, doesn't she, darling?"

"Well, I hate taking it, mother," the young man said. "I hate being a dependent. I want to stand on my own feet. Oh, sometimes I think I'll chuck up the whole thing, and go right off and make a life for myself in some other part of the world."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Micky," said his mother gently. "You've got to stay right here, my dear, and take care of me. You know I'd just simply fade out if I didn't have you somewhere near me. Well now, what is it you want me to do? You want me to stand by and be of some use to Hester Slayde? What are you afraid of, Micky?"

They strolled round the studio (it was a fairly large room) arm in arm, and he told her that he was perfectly convinced that Elizabeth Charlbury would never settle in that old house at Kennington.

"She's just playing her part," he said. "And she's doing it very cleverly. But it isn't reasonable to expect a girl so beautiful, and so smart, and so worldly—because she is of the world, and she is very ambitious—to settle down in that very unsmart part of the world with only Hester for companionship. I'll tell you what I had in my mind. Are you very full up with commissions just now? I thought I'd get Hester to ask you to make a portrait of Elizabeth Charlbury. How does that strike you? And be sure you name a good price, otherwise it isn't worth doing. My reason is that I want this girl to come here . . . I want you to know her, and to tell me what you think about her. And then you will be better able to advise Hester."

"I'd like to paint Hester Slayde herself," said Mrs. O'Malley. "She'd make a really fine portrait. But I catch on to your idea, Micky. Well now, is that something you will settle, or shall I write to Hester Slayde?"

"Oh, I must fix it," said Michael. "It must be done very tactfully. And I can be tactful, you know, Mummy, my own, when I want to be."

"You are always a darling!" said Mrs. O'Malley, and she stooped to rest her head on his breast, whilst he kissed her brow and her hair. "As it happens," his mother said, "I have nothing definitely fixed for the immediate moment, so if I could do this portrait it would be rather a good thing."

"Well, leave it to me," said Michael.

And then he kissed her again, and in a little while he took his leave.

Chapter VIII

THE matter of arranging for Elizabeth Charlbury to sit for her portrait to Marcella Brodey (his mother had always kept her maiden name as a painter) was very quickly arranged. In fact, Hester Slayde simply jumped at the suggestion.

And when Michael said:

" Well, now you will have to talk terms with my mother, Hester," she coloured very hotly, and she turned to him.

" Oh, Mr. Michael, won't *you* do that for me, please ? And let your dear mother know as whatever the picture costs, it's quite all right."

" Yes, but that isn't the way to go about business, Hester," Michael said. And then he thought it a good opportunity to broach the subject which he had at heart. " You see, I'll tell you what I've been thinking. It will be a mutual benefit. Miss Charlbury hasn't very much to do, so it will be a great thing for her to come in contact with my mother, and I believe this will be a relief to you, dear old soul ! For she is a bit difficult, isn't she ? "

But Hester would not allow this. She shook her head.

" It's me that's difficult, Mr. Michael," she said. " But I'm pretty sure you can arrange things all right."

" Well, I'm going to do it this way. I'm going to tell Miss Charlbury that she is just the type for which my mother is looking for a picture she has undertaken to paint this early autumn. And I shall suggest that they start their sittings as soon as possible. Where is Miss Charlbury, by the way ? "

" My dear, she's gone out. She's gone to have tea with Miss Winscott. That dear young lady came in her car, and she just asked me too, but I didn't care to go, you know. I'm best here, Mr. Michael. There's no place for such as me in fashionable houses. And then I've got a fair amount to do. I am thinking, my dear, of selling this old house, and that will mean a lot of turnin' out of cupboards and drawers, you know."

Michael's heart contracted a little as he saw the expression on Hester's face. But he answered her cheerily :

" Why, that's a splendid idea, Hester ! I think you should come a little nearer town. As you have taken on the care of a fashionable young woman and a most attractive young woman too, you can't very well keep her boxed up out here, you know. Kennington was all very well for Aunt Sophie, but I fancy Miss Charlbury would like to be a little nearer town."

" She ain't said nothing to me, Mr. Michael," Hester said, and she spoke very eagerly. " It's what I've been thinkin' out of myself. You see, I've had a very fair offer for the house. There's some people what want to make it into a boarding-house, and that's just about what I think it's suited for. There's such a lot of big rooms. And then," Hester hurried on to say " we get a bit lonely and down, she and me, staying 'ere by ourselves. And that's where I am going to ask you to help me. I'm going to ask you to find some place what will be a proper sort of home for Miss Charlbury, because——" Tears came into her eyes, and she coloured very hotly, and then she turned very pale, and she put out her hand and laid it on Michael's arm. " I'll tell you why I'm wantin' to do so much for her, my

dear. Because I come across, quite unexpected like, a day or so ago, an old leathern case full of papers, and I only just had to glance at these papers and I knew they was the letters what told the story of my poor dear's life! There was a portrait or two, which I did look at, but I didn't look at the letters, I just put them back. But the portrait was signed 'Roger Charlbury,' and I have been thinking I understand now why Miss Charlbury's father always told her that if she turned to Miss Martingate she wouldn't never turn in vain!"

"You haven't said anything about this to her, have you?" queried Michael. He put the question almost anxiously.

Hester Slayde shook her head.

"No, my dear, it's not my business; indeed, in a sense I'm right sorry as I opened that case, Mr. Michael, and yet on the other hand, I'm glad, because it just strengthens me in my belief as I'm doin' just what my dear mistress would have done! I'm pretty sure Miss Martingate would have been eager to do everything in the world for Miss Charlbury, and so you see I want to do what she would have done. I expect you understand?"

"Yes, Hester dear, I understand," said Michael.

He rang up his mother when he got back to his grandmother's house, and he told her that the sittings might start as soon as possible.

"You've got to ask your full price, or else you won't please dear old Hester. At any rate, mother dearest, you'll have a wonderfully beautiful creature to work at. And look here, I want you to make friends with Miss Charlbury, if possible. And I want you to work in with me, and help Hester. She's going to leave that old house, and we've *got* to help her, mother! She'll need help!"

. . . .

Jane Briggs began to be a little nervous about her father. He seemed to her to be fading visibly.

It was a little difficult to follow her brother's movements, and Gerald never wrote letters. But Durning kept his young mistress in close touch with all that went on abroad, and somehow or other he managed to convey to Jane a little touch of uneasiness.

She had told her father that her brother was bound to get into trouble, and she was fully convinced that Durning had taken on no easy task. At the same time, she was so fond of her father, and so anxious about him, that she began to fret and fidget, and she came to the conclusion that the best thing she could do would be to get her brother home.

She had sent various telegrams to Durning and at last she sat down and wrote a few lines to Gerald.

The summer was passing, the season was at an end, and the smart people had left London. But Mr. Briggs clung on to his home. When his daughter proposed that he should go to Scotland, or cross the Channel, he always shook his head.

"I'm best where I am! I'm a bit tired for some reason. It was that heat in July this year. And I want to be here, Jane," he said, "to be right on the spot when Jerry comes back. He seems to have been gone a long time."

"Oh! he's only been gone a few weeks, Daddy! But, if you're fretting about him, let's get him back."

This was when Jane wrote to her brother and told him he had to come back to London without delay.

And to his father's great surprise, one hot night after dinner as Jane and he sat in the lofty dining-room, with the windows flung open on to a courtyard beyond, there came the sound of someone in the hall, the door was flung open, and Gerald Briggs appeared.

His father got up with a low cry, and stretched out both his hands.

"Jerry!" he said. "Oh, my dear, my dear! I'm right glad to see you! Real glad, my boy!"

Over her father's shoulder, Jane telegraphed a very strong expression to her brother: that expression conveyed, as eloquently as words, "Play up, you fool!"

And so Gerald Briggs went straight to his father, and let his father put his arms about him and kiss him.

"I say!" he said, a bit awkwardly. "That's all right! You're all to pieces, Dad! What's the matter with you? Here, hold up . . . hold up!"

Jane rushed forward, and the boy and the girl between them put old Briggs back into the big chair in which he had been sitting. And then Jane snatched up a glass of water and held it to her father's lips.

"You shouldn't have come like that," she scolded under her breath. "Why on earth didn't you let us know? He's been fretting about you badly and it's been so hot, he's not himself."

Gerald Briggs, though he was so vulgar and not what Elizabeth Charlbury would call a desirable acquaintance, possessed a heart. And as he looked at his father's white face and noticed the change in him, he had a spasm of pain, and a little choking feeling in his throat.

"That's all right," he said again, and he went and sat down beside his father, and took one of the limp, cold hands in his. "That's all right, dear old thing . . . that's all right! Say! why on earth didn't you send for me? I would have come back. Durning was for ever wanting me to come back. He said he was sure you wanted to see me."

Jane had touched the bell, and as the butler came in, she went towards him, and she asked him to telephone through to the doctor her father was in the habit of having.

"Just say Mr. Briggs seems very poorly, and I'm a bit anxious about him."

The butler nodded his head, and went away.

And then Jane went back and sat on the other side of her father's chair.

"Now, Daddy, you've got everything you want, you know, so you must buck up, old dear! Jerry's back again and I am here, and we are going to be ever so jolly and happy together."

The old man tried to smile: he opened his eyes with an effort, and then he left his hands one each in the hands of his children.

"Very stupid of me. I don't know when I 'ave been that queer. But it's real good to see you, Jerry my boy. And 'ave you had a good time? Have you enjoyed it in them foreign countries?"

If Gerald Briggs had answered truthfully, he would have said:

"No, I have not enjoyed anything. The whole of my life has been poisoned by the contempt of a beautiful, cold-hearted, callous and stuck-up young woman."

But his sister was looking at him imploringly, and so he did not speak the truth.

"Why, it's been a rippin' time," he said. "My! Durning and me, we've

seen some things, I can tell you. Not that I don't like London best, Dad. I am just as glad to get back again as you are I'm here. And now you're going to buck up since I have come back, aren't you, old timer ? "

Late that night, when the doctor had been, and old Mr. Briggs had been taken upstairs to his room, and been put into bed, the brother and sister sat and talked.

" Say ! " said Gerald Briggs, " I had no idea that the old man was so poorly. Why didn't you let me know ? "

" You're a nice one to talk," his sister replied. " Why didn't you write ? I sent telegrams to Durning, and I sent a letter to you to Rome."

" Didn't get as far as Rome," the young man answered. " Just hung about Paris, and we were for going on to Switzerland because Durning said that would be better than going to Italy ; but somehow I didn't care about it, and so I just turned round and came back."

" Oh ! " said Jane.

She was studying her brother very closely. There was a change in him : he had grown a little older, and he looked worn.

" Look here ! You know you can tell me things. You know you can trust me, Jerry. You know I've got a head on my shoulders ? Well, speak right out ! Something's wrong with you. What is it ? "

" Oh, leave a chap alone," said young Briggs angrily. " You're such a nosey person, Jane."

" Well, so I am when it's people that I care about," said Jane stoutly. " Look here, I don't want father to get the wind up about you. And I'll tell you that you've got to look a little better than you do now, if you don't want to worry him. Why, you're half the size you were, Jerry ! You look as if you had had an illness. Look here, what is it ? Is it a woman ? "

The boy sat chewing a cigarette, and then he took it out of his mouth, and he answered her straightforwardly.

" Yes, it's a woman, and she's just put a knife right into my heart, Jane, I can tell you ! It's sure down there now."

" Oh ! " said Jane.

She had grown a little pale. Though she, as she put it, " ragged " her brother, she was very fond of him, and his look, the bitterness in his voice, and the knowledge that he had suffered, hurt the girl very sharply.

" Well, look here, you've told me so much, you'd better tell me the whole lot. Who is she ? What happened ? What did she do ? A bad lot, I suppose ? "

At this Gerald Briggs flared up.

" Don't you talk about what you don't know, Jane," he said. " Elizabeth was *not* a bad lot. It's the other way about. She was just a bit too big for me, that's all ! She's a lady, she is ! . . . And she doesn't mix with folk like us."

Jane Briggs flared out.

" Oh, doesn't she," she said. " I think I can take her measure ! Someone who has been trying to patronize you, and at the same time, ran after you because she knew you had a bit of money ! Well, I'm meeting this kind every day now, my dear Jerry ! I tell you, I'm fed up with the lot of people we've been meeting since mother died, and we came to live at this house. Don't seem to me as if I knew a single decent person, except a girl called Winscott. And I like her ! Yes, I do," said Jane stoutly. " She's the real sort, she is. Now then, tell me all about it, Jerry."

The boy walked about the big room uncertainly for a time, and then he suddenly felt the need of opening his heart to someone. He had not been able to confide his trouble to Durning, and though he was always a little nervous of Jane (she had such a thorough, downright sort of manner which was a little disconcerting) he resolved now to tell her all about that little episode at Boulogne; only keeping back the full name of the girl who had hurt him so badly.

Jane lit a cigarette, and was sitting on the arm of her father's big chair swinging her feet. She nodded every now and then as she listened to her brother's recital.

"I suppose you don't want to tell me who she is?" she said, after he had come to the end.

The boy looked a little sullen.

"No, I guess I'll hang on to that for a time. It isn't quite fair to her, you know, Jane."

"Well," said Miss Briggs a little dryly, "I can't see that we need trouble ourselves very much about being fair to a girl of this type. She must be a bit of a tough proposition if you ask me. Travelling by herself, staying at a hotel and picking up with a chance acquaintance and driving about with a young man! My dear Jerry, all this doesn't say very much for her, at least as a social person."

"Why, that's what I said to her myself," Gerald Briggs remarked, "but she answered that nowadays girls go everywhere alone! And it's true, Jane, they do! I knocked up against quite a number of them: and if they weren't quite alone perhaps, well they weren't travelling with any older people. Girls rushing about Paris all by themselves, and picking up with any sort of man. It's a queer sort of way people have of going on nowadays, I must say!"

Jane Briggs was a very shrewd young woman, and she saw at once that the way to go to work with her brother was not to attack this beautiful young woman who had undoubtedly made her brother very unhappy, but to play a little bit of the sympathetic part with him.

"Why, yes," she said, as she continued smoking and swinging her feet, "that's quite right as far as it goes. Girls can and do go anywhere by themselves nowadays. I don't suppose there was any real harm in your young woman and perhaps you did something to put her back up, you know? You aren't exactly yet a man of the world, Jerry. I expect she was a bit older than you are."

"I don't know about that," young Briggs answered, and now his voice took on a note which his sister had never heard before. "All I know is that she's the only girl I care about, and I'd give everything I've got to be able to stand well with her, Jane! Oh, she's the right sort, she is, and I can't forget her."

"Well now, let's talk about father," said Jane Briggs, changing the subject rather abruptly. "I don't mind telling you, Jerry, I'm a bit frightened. Dear old man, he's been looking so white these last few weeks, and he's not a bit the same man he used to be. What on earth should we do if we hadn't got father?"

"Here, hold on!" said Gerald Briggs a little roughly. "Don't talk like that. If he's been fretting about me, well, I've come back, you see, and so he'll pull up and get better. Why don't you get him out of London? That would do him good."

"Well, he won't go! I've tried my best to induce him to have a change but he doesn't seem to have the desire to go anywhere, or the strength to move. So it's up to us! And we've got to be very good to him, Jerry, that's a fact. For he's been jolly good to us, you know. I don't believe there could have been a better father in the world than our father has been where we are concerned!"

As she said this, Jane got up and went out of the room quickly. She wanted to hide the fact that tears had rushed into her eyes.

And left to himself, Gerald poured out a glass of port wine. But he did not drink it. He sat staring out through the open window to the courtyard beyond, and he could see as clearly as if she were standing there in front of him a vision of Elizabeth Charlbury as he had last seen her in the moonlight so beautiful, so cold, so cruel!

And then he got up, swallowed the wine with a gulp, and went towards the window.

"I've just got to forget her, that's about the beginning and the end of it," he said to himself doggedly.

And yet as he told himself this, he knew deep down in his heart that Elizabeth, and all that belonged to Elizabeth, could not be pushed out of his memory for some time to come, if ever!

Chapter IX

WELL used as she was to seeing beautiful people, or rather very good-looking ones, the first time that Mrs. O'Malley looked on Elizabeth Charlbury, she felt her pulses quicken with that artistic delight which beauty always brought to her, and, at the same time, she felt a little throb of nervousness contract her heart.

Most painters get by degrees an instinct of something of the character of those who sit for their portraits. With Marcella it was something more than an instinct: it was a gift and a definite gift, and one of the real factors of her success. For she was successful, although she never seemed to have enough money to meet the requirements of her everyday life.

And so with this instinctive gift of reading character she knew that what she saw in Elizabeth Charlbury's face convinced her that the beauty of this woman was simply the beauty of the flesh; that there was no soul behind this loveliness, no depth of feeling, no heart, and that was why her own heart gave that little throb of apprehension because she was afraid for her boy.

In a vague sort of way she had guessed that his grandmother had already settled in her mind that Michael was to marry Judith Winscott.

She liked Judith very much indeed, but Marcella was not quite sure that this would be the right wife for her boy. As a matter of fact she did not want Michael to marry for some time to come; not until he could (as he put it himself) stand on his own feet and be independent.

Over and over again she had tried to supplement the allowance his grandmother made him and the small salary he earned, by gifts of money, but here Michael had always proved that he had a will of his own. He would never take any money from her; he always told her that she had quite enough to do without giving any to him, and he always tried to impress upon her the necessity of putting some money away.

If he were to marry Judith Winscott, there would be money in plenty; for Sir Henry, as has already been said, was a very rich man, and also Judith had inherited money from her mother.

But Mrs. O'Malley was not at all desirous that Michael should marry a girl simply because that girl happened to have money. She craved for her son such happiness as had come to her in her brief married life with his father.

Michael, she knew, had much greater strength and stood on firmer ground than his father stood; but, at the same time, there was a good deal of the artistic temperament in him, and he was so lovable, that he was in a sense a little weak.

So she found herself praying, as she began to talk with Elizabeth Charlbury, and to sketch in the rough charcoal outline of the portrait, that this girl, who had appeared as it were out of the unknown, might never take it into her head to indulge in any sentiment with Michael.

On her side Elizabeth was very much attracted to Michael's mother. She had had a fairly good acquaintance with foreign artists, and was quite at home in studios. As a matter of fact she had been painted, and drawn, and sketched by innumerable painters, and the same attention had been lavished on her father.

It was nothing to her therefore that Marcella's hair was ruffled and her painting overall was none too clean, nor that she smoked the whole time she was working. She saw in Michael's mother something more than the artist. She saw an arresting personality, a woman who if she had cared for ambition could have arrived at the very top of the tree and have had everything at her feet.

She was very careful was Elizabeth not to talk too much about Michael Pannister at the start. On the contrary, she talked, vaguely, it may be confessed, about her father and his work, and about the places which she had visited with him, and sometimes she would speak about Hester in a kind of patronizing, affectionate way.

"Such a good soul! You know she really is out to spoil me!"

To this Marcella had replied with a little laugh:

"Oh, you are not likely to be spoilt by Hester. It's a strange kind of household yours, Miss Charlbury. I have never been to that house in Kennington, but I've heard all about it from Michael. Of course I knew a lot about poor old Sophia Martingate. She was a character if ever there was one, an eccentric person who did no end of good. I sometimes wonder," Mrs. O'Malley said in a musing way, "whether she showed her wisest side when she left all this money to poor Hester."

"Why do you say 'poor Hester'?" inquired Elizabeth. "Surely anyone who has such a big fortune, and so much power put into her hands, is not to be pitied?"

"Well, I do pity her," the artist answered. "Just turn your head a little to the right, will you, please? Thank you. You have a very perfect profile, Miss Charlbury. Of course you know that you are a very wonderfully endowed person? I don't see much resemblance to your father, however," Mrs. O'Malley added.

Elizabeth pounced on this remark quickly.

"Oh, so you knew my father? I never heard him mention you."

Mrs. O'Malley laughed.

"I don't suppose he would remember me, my dear. I met him casually. But I made some sketches of him . . . I'll show them to you."

Elizabeth leant back in the arm-chair in which she was sitting, and then she said in her very cool voice :

"I'm beginning to realize that there must have been some very big romance between my father and Miss Martingate. I wonder why they didn't marry ?"

Mrs. O'Malley shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't even know that there was a romance. I think they were very good friends, but friends don't always marry, you know."

Elizabeth laughed.

"No, of course not." And then she said with a bitter note in her voice : "Well, my father made a hash of it apparently with his marriage when it did come along ! You know I have never known my mother ! I suppose you can't tell me anything about her ? He never would speak of her to me. I don't even know what her name was. I only know she was supposed to be very beautiful. And once he said I was very like her, but I don't think he meant it as a compliment."

Marcella threw away the end of the cigarette, and sat down screwing her eyes to get the focus better. Then she said abruptly :

"Were you fond of your father ?"

Elizabeth Charlbury paused before answering, and then she said :

"Yes, I think so. There was never any real affection between us. You see, there was a barrier. I think he did his duty by me, but as I've just said, I think his marriage must have been a hopeless mistake, and I being the outcome of that marriage awakened nothing very tender in his heart."

To this Marcella answered almost involuntarily :

"My dear, you are a very dangerous young woman because you have far too much head, and far too little heart."

It was a remark which, for some reason or other, annoyed Elizabeth, and she answered it a trifle petulantly.

"What's the use of having a heart ? One only gets uncomfortable results. And I've got to have a head on my shoulders, because although Hester Slayde is being very good to me, I am merely a pensioner on her charity, you know."

At that moment the studio door opened, and Michael came in.

"Who's talking about pensioners on charity ?"

He went up to his mother and kissed her tenderly and he gave Elizabeth a little nod. Then he glanced at the study on the easel and his face lit up.

"I can prophesy this is going to be a very wonderful piece of work !" he said. "You know, Miss Charlbury, you are in luck to have such an artist as my mother to paint your portrait !"

"I know it," said Elizabeth, and she gave him a dazzling smile, "but I didn't really know I was going to have a portrait," she added. "I thought I was just going to be a model for a picture."

"You are going to be both, my dear," said Mrs. O'Malley, "but you've been sitting some time, so I think you can get up and stretch yourself. We'll fix another sitting for to-morrow, if you are not too much engaged ?"

At this Elizabeth laughed a little bitterly.

"Engaged !" she said. "Oh ! my engagements are as yet very few and far between. I am lunching out to-day, but as a general rule I just hang about that old house, and wonder what I am going to do with myself ! You see, I don't care about books," she said in her frank way, "they bore me. At least English novels do. I have read a good many French and Spanish, but that's a different matter. All the same," she added very gaily,

speaking on quickly to take away what she imagined might be a rather uncomfortable impression on Michael's mind, " I am prepared to like everything that is English. I have done so much travelling about in foreign places, and I love London already. I think it is the most beautiful city in the world ! And I love your studio, Mrs. O'Malley, it has such a delightful influence. I saw one or two of your pictures in Paris. There's a delightful portrait of a girl in one of the Museums. The Luxembourg, I think ! "

It was Michael's face that lit up, and a flush of pleasure came into his cheeks.

" She's the most wonderful creature in the world, you know, Miss Charlbury," he said. " I'm only a bit worried about her because she works so hard. I've some news for you," he added almost at once. " I've just had a telephone message from Hester. And what do you think ? She has sold the house in Kennington, and she's in treaty for a furnished one which I've recommended to her. It's in Curzon Street."

Elizabeth's face lit up suddenly.

" You are a very wonderful person, Mr. Pannister," she said. " I despaired of getting Hester away from that part of the world. As a matter of fact I didn't feel I had the slightest right to suggest that she should leave. She has been there for so many years, she's happy there ; and, after all I am nothing but an intruder, a stranger."

She came down off the dais as she spoke. She was wearing a white crêpe de chine gown, very plainly made, but which had come from one of the smartest French shops in town, and had cost a great deal of money. Hester had opened an account for her and Elizabeth had been spending freely. Round her neck she had a quaint string of beads, green, and blue and mauve. This necklace had been a gift also from one of the American sons. It had no great value, but it was very beautiful, and it suited Elizabeth in an amazing way.

Watching him carefully, Marcella noticed how her son's eyes followed the graceful figure in the white clinging dress as Elizabeth moved to where there was a long mirror, and a table on which stood the hat she put on. She noted, too, a little eagerness in Michael's voice as he answered the girl's last speech.

" You make a great mistake ! You are not an intruder, or a stranger, as far as Hester is concerned. You are, if I may say so, Miss Charlbury, the real motive of her existence at this time. She has never had anyone belonging to her ; never anyone whom she could love, and she is prepared not only to love you, but to worship you."

Elizabeth turned round and smiled at him. Her eyes under the broad-brimmed hat on which were clustered flowers which matched the necklace she wore in colour, had a shining light in them.

" I only hope she won't be quite so foolish, my dear Mr. Pannister," she said. " Believe me, I am not a person to be put on a pedestal. I am a very human, very worldly individual, as your mother will be able to tell you when we have had a few more sittings. Well, Mrs. O'Malley, I'll come to you to-morrow any time you would like to propose. Now I'm afraid I must hurry, as I am going to lunch with Judith Winscott and a great friend of hers. In fact, I think Miss Winscott is giving a girl luncheon party. Isn't she a dear ? "

" Judith is a very sweet, lovable character," Mrs. O'Malley said quietly. " Well, Michael, will you take Miss Charlbury and get her a taxi ? "

" Oh, I've got a car waiting," said Elizabeth. " You know Hester won't let me go anywhere without a car. I don't know how much money she's got,

but she's spending it in the most reckless fashion on me! So wonderful to be able to spend money recklessly!" the girl added with a sharp sigh.

Michael was some little time before he came back to the studio, and his mother was sitting at her writing-table scribbling a note.

"Well, what do you think of her, mother?" inquired the young man as he came behind and dropped a kiss on her ruffled hair.

"One of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen, and one of the most dangerous."

A slight frown knitted Michael's brow.

"How do you mean dangerous?" he asked as he moved away and flung himself into a low chair.

"Just that," said his mother with a shrug of her shoulders. "Dangerous! She's very beautiful, Michael, but she's cruel, heartless; a woman I'm afraid who can do a great deal of harm."

A little colour had rushed into Michael Pannister's face. He did not answer at once, and then when he did, there was a little reproach in his voice.

"It's not a bit like you to judge anyone harshly."

His mother's face was turned away from him, and she was still stooping over her desk. Instantly she saw she had made a very great mistake, and as instantly she changed her tone. She turned round in her chair and blew him a kiss.

"You are quite right, boy, that was an unjust remark. After all, I don't know this girl, and one must not jump to conclusions. I expect I've got the idea somewhere in my mind that because she is so beautiful physically she must have some imperfections of character to balance the rest."

"Well, I'm sorry for her," said Michael. And then he explained. "I mean, being so beautiful as she is, it must be precious hard for a girl to feel that she must live on the charity of someone else."

"Oh, she won't be with Hester for very long . . . she'll marry. She only wants to be launched into the world properly, and she'll be an enormous success. She's making a good start, too. She can't have a nicer friend than Judith, or a better house to go to than Sir Henry Winscott's." Then Marcella changed the subject. "And so Hester has really sold the old house? Well, she is a brave creature, and I do hope things are going to work out all for the best with her."

A little while before, Michael had expressed to his mother a fear that things would be very difficult for Hester Slayde, and that he was anxious about her, but now even the suggestion that trouble might come to her through Elizabeth irritated him.

He was scarcely conscious of how much he revealed to his mother and he would have been immensely surprised if he could have known with what deepened apprehension that mother's heart beat as they spoke about Elizabeth Charlbury.

And when he gave her the information that his grandmother that morning had written to Miss Charlbury asking her to give her the pleasure of taking tea with her, Mrs. O'Malley's heart contracted just a little more sharply.

Only let Lady Pannister get the mere suggestion that she, Marcella, was anxious about Michael where this girl was concerned (and literally dreading the possibility of her boy losing his heart to Elizabeth!) and things would go very badly. There was no limit to the hostility with which Lady Pannister regarded her late son's wife.

But tact was part of Marcella's life, and she was very cautious, and fell

into her son's mood now. And she kept her anxiety stored in her heart until she found it possible to open that heart and share the anxiety with her husband.

Peter O'Malley listened in silence, and then he put his arm round his wife, and gave her a squeeze.

"Sure you'll be fretting yourself about something where the boy's concerned. Now listen, my dear! Leave me to tell you you're quite wrong. I've eyes in my head, Marcella, and it's Judy, the girl that's got your boy's heart right enough. And the proper wife she'll be for him, too."

"Oh, Peter, you're so comforting!"

Marcella nestled in her big husband's arms, and laid her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes. He *was* comforting! He was an odd mixture: sometimes she would look upon him as if he might have been her son, and other times he was shrewd and wise, and he helped her out of many difficulties.

Their union was one of real comradeship and deep sympathy, and as a matter of fact Peter O'Malley was as fond of Michael as if the young man had been his own child. And he set to work now to put all kinds of doubts and perplexities out of his wife's brain and heart.

When he got up and studied the charcoal sketch on the easel, he gave a nod.

"Good work, little woman," he said, "and a fine model. A little too soon for me to give you my opinion about this young woman, but I'll do it sure after you've got a little way ahead with the portrait."

And then Mr. O'Malley insisted on carrying his wife away from the studio up the stairs to their own little sitting room, where he fussed about her and plied her with all those thoughtful actions which mean so much to the independent woman.

At such times it was she who was the child, and Peter O'Malley who was in authority, and he had such a happy way of going to work that by the time luncheon was served, Marcella had completely forgotten all her doubts and fears where her boy was concerned.

Chapter X

Lady Pannister heard of the sale of the old house in Kennington, and made no remark at first. She only sniffed, but when she was told that Hester Slayde was going to establish herself, and the young woman who was living with her, in a furnished house in the West End, she lashed out once more at her sister, and at the woman who had inherited everything Sophia Martingate had to leave.

"It's disgraceful! It's shocking. What is working in this Slayde woman's mind where this girl is concerned? I suppose she tells you everything?"

It was Michael of course to whom this remark was made. And the young man shook his head with a whimsical smile.

"On the contrary, Hester doesn't ask my advice about anything. She doesn't need to."

Lady Pannister looked at him sharply, and then she said:

"I follow you. She's letting herself be led by the nose by this Charlbury girl. A nice piece of business it is altogether!" Then she put a question abruptly to her grandson. "Have you seen Judith Winscott just recently?"

As the young man shook his head, she said:

"Oh, I thought so. Then you don't know she's doing very foolish things too. She has struck up a tremendous friendship with some very common, but very rich people. She actually brought the girl of this family to call on me the other day, a pert, self-possessed piece of goods. I suppose she is what would be called smart and up-to-date, but I don't like her. Her name is Briggs. Haven't you been introduced ?"

"Not yet," Michael said. "I've heard a lot about Miss Briggs. I believe she is a very clever girl. Judy was speaking to me on the telephone the other day, and she declared there was nothing that Jane Briggs could not do if she were put to the test. Evidently Judith has lost her heart to the old father. He is a retired merchant, or something of that sort."

At this Lady Pannister snorted.

"Merchant !" she said. "You mean tradesman. Nice state of things when our well-bred girls must go playing about with the daughters of retired tradesmen ! Well now, you've been to this house in Mayfair, I suppose ? What is it like ?"

"I think you know the house, Gran," the young man answered a little wearily.

Sometimes his grandmother's fearful nagging and fault-finding got on his nerves.

"It is the Alderan's house," he added. "I have an idea you have been there."

"What an astonishing thing it is," said Lady Pannister in her sharp way, "that people like the Alderans find it necessary to let their house furnished. Of course I know the house, and I've been there constantly. Imagine such a place being let to a creature like Hester Slayde ! By the way, Michael, you have never brought Miss Charlbury to see me."

"I think she is waiting for you to invite her, Gran."

At this Lady Pannister laughed harshly.

"Well, she'll have to wait," she said irritably.

Nevertheless Michael was quite convinced that she was beginning to be very anxious to come in contact with Elizabeth Charlbury.

When he thought about the matter, and conjured up all that his mother had told him (and all he had gleaned from Hester about the old days when Roger Charlbury had played such an important part in the lives of the two Martingate young women), it struck Michael as being almost grotesque that anyone could associate his grandmother with a romance.

He happened to know that there never had been any deep affection between herself and the late General Sir Charles Pannister. And he would have declared had this happened a little while before that the world might have been turned upside down, but the idea that his grandmother could ever have had any sentimental attachment, even when she was a girl, would have seemed to him utterly impossible.

Like many other people, however, Michael was destined to know that life is full of the strangest revelations. He felt a little fretted because he had to pay such constant attention to his grandmother. Usually at this time of the year, Lady Pannister went either to her country house or to some seaside place, but this year she refused to move, although the weather was extremely hot, and August was drawing to a close.

He had made his way very frequently to the beautiful house just out of Curzon Street, and he had to confess that Elizabeth was in her rightful setting in such surroundings. But there were many things attached to this girl's

sojourn with Hester Slayde which were not particularly easy for Michael to accept.

To begin with, despite all that he could say to Hester, he could not induce her to come out, as it were, from the background of life and take her proper place. Of course he was fully aware that all the objections which she urged against her doing anything in a social sense were absolutely well founded. She certainly was not fit to play an important part in the world of society.

And she had very quickly determined to relegate all such duties as might have fallen to her lot to someone better suited. Here she had asked Judith Winscott's help.

She had been very frank with Miss Winscott.

"Dear Mr. Michael, he's always after me to be dressing myself up and to be sitting at the head of the table, and all the rest of it, Miss. But you must agree that it would be a great mistake. All that I want to do for my dear Miss Charlbury would just be spoilt. And I'd be just wretched as I can be, Miss Judith."

"I know exactly how Micky feels about you," Judith Winscott had hastened to say.

As a matter of fact she had grown very fond of Hester. There had sprung up between them a very real bond of love and sympathetic friendship. The good qualities and sweet heart of Hester Slayde had made an instant appeal to Sir Henry Winscott's daughter.

And though she, too, was giving generous homage to Elizabeth Charlbury, and was eager to show this beautiful stranger all the kindness and friendship there were times when, like Michael, she was conscious of the feeling that Elizabeth was destined to give Hester Slayde a good deal of unhappiness.

When Hester had appealed to her most earnestly to find some lady who would take over the duties of a chaperon and go about with Elizabeth, because, as she explained to Judith, she was very old-fashioned and she did not hold, that's the way she put it, with young girls being let go about alone, Miss Winscott immediately began to think of how she could be of real help.

She remembered then a certain cousin of her mother's, a lady who had been very wealthy, but who had lost all her money in the war, and who would be only too thankful to find some home where she would be required to do such very light work for a very good salary.

Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders when Judith had told her of what Hester had desired her to do.

"Of course," she said, "I know quite well, dear old soul; she frets about me even if I walk the length of the street by myself, which is really rather funny when you think of it, for I have been so independent." She hastened to qualify this statement: "Well, what I mean is, I had to do things by myself when I was with my father. And of course, you know, Judith, I had to go out as a kind of governess maid after his death. It was when I was so badly treated by those American people that I remembered all about Miss Martingate, and I wrote to her and asked her for help. I must confess," Elizabeth added with a little laugh, "I never expected to fall on my feet in such a way as I have done! I am afraid I should not have had such a warm welcome from Miss Martingate, although I am told by Hester, and I can pretty well guess for myself, that she was very much in love with my father, and I dare say she would have done a good deal for me, but"—here Elizabeth shrugged her shoulders again—"I repeat I had not the slightest idea of being welcomed in such a splendid way."

To this Judith replied eagerly:

"Yes, Hester is splendid. What a beautiful nature! What a sweet woman! I love her, Elizabeth."

"Oh yes, you love everybody. You certainly have a very big heart," said Elizabeth with a little bit of a sneer. "Well, I'm different. I don't love Hester; it's not very easy for me to love strange people, but I am very grateful to her. And I think this arrangement you have just told me about your cousin, Mrs. Wakefield, consenting to come here and act as chaperon to me is really a delightful piece of news, because, thanks to you, my dear, and a little probably to Michael's influence, people are beginning to take a little notice of me; for which I suppose I ought to be very much obliged."

Judith ignored the sneer.

"Well, there's a girl I know who is very anxious to meet you," she answered. "She has heard so much about you from me. You know, she was supposed to have come to my luncheon party, but it appears that her father was ill, and she could not leave him. I like Jane immensely, and I have an idea you'll like her too. She's good looking and very clever."

"It's a fine combination," said Elizabeth.

She and Judith Winscott were sitting in the room which Hester had put aside for Elizabeth's use entirely. It was a beautifully furnished boudoir, and it was always kept full of flowers, and Elizabeth had already bought a number of costly, pretty things to scatter about her.

Now she was very anxious for Judith to go, because she had been rung up by Michael in the morning, and he had said he would come for her in the afternoon as he wanted her to go out with him to see the car which Hester had commissioned him to buy for Elizabeth. Up to now they had been using a hired car, but Hester had determined that her ward must have a car of her own.

But Judith sat on talking lightly, unconscious apparently of Elizabeth's growing irritation, until the door opened and Michael appeared. Then a little colour rushed into the girl's cheeks, a fact which was quickly noted by Miss Charlbury, who had already guessed that this young man was something more than an old friend to Sir Henry Winscott's daughter.

And the three young people sat and chatted for awhile, and then Judith, feeling in a sense that she was *de trop*, got up and went away. As Michael opened the door for her to pass out she looked up at him and said:

"Daddy was saying the other night, it's a long time since you have been to dine with us, Micky."

"Well, I've been very busy . . . I've been kept with my nose to the grindstone. I'm not absolutely sure I shan't have to go abroad with my chief. But please tell Sir Henry I will come and see him now very soon."

As he strolled back into the room, and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs, Elizabeth handed him a box of cigarettes.

"It must be awfully nice, you know, Michael," she said, "to be so much loved as you are."

Young Pannister coloured hotly for an instant, and then he said:

"Well, I didn't know I was so much loved. I happen to have a number of friends, and a great number of acquaintances; but beyond Hester, and my mother, and Peter O'Malley, I don't know that I've anybody very much in love with me."

"Well, I can tell you, you have." And then she abruptly changed the

conversation. "You haven't noticed my hair," she said. "I suppose that's because I have been facing you. Now have a good look at me."

She turned her head, and Michael uttered an exclamation.

"Oh, my dear girl! You don't mean to say you have cut off all your lovely hair! What madness!"

"I've had it a good time," Elizabeth remarked. "And I wanted to be in the fashion. Everyone has her hair shingled nowadays."

"Well, that's the reason why yours was so lovely. You were one all by yourself," the young man said. "Of course," he added, "I know you have a beautiful head, and this shingle is very becoming. But, what does my mother say?" he queried.

"Well, the portrait is nearly finished, you know, and she has not seen me yet as I am now. Michael, I am in love with your mother! What an enchanting person! But what an elusive one. By that I mean," Elizabeth went on quickly, "that despite all her charm and her sweetness, I feel there is a very big barrier between myself and her. I wish I could break that barrier down!"

"Oh, my dear," the young man said quickly, "I think you make a mistake. Mother is full of admiration for you, and does nothing but talk about your cleverness. She predicts a great future for you, Elizabeth."

"That's very good of Mrs. O'Malley," said Elizabeth, quietly. She took a cigarette and lit it, and as she did so, she said: "Let us sit here a little while before we go out. It is still very hot and I don't feel very energetic. What a long summer we are having. Not that I object to the heat. I expect I shall find London pretty dreary and gloomy in the winter."

"Oh, but you must get Hester to take you abroad . . . go to the South," Michael said.

She did not answer at once, and then she said:

"You know I've been abroad so long that I got fed up with the various continental places. No, I think we will stay on in England, at any rate for a little while. But when your mother talks about my having a brilliant future, I suppose she forgets that I am really a pauper. I have nothing of my own, and people cannot expect to have brilliant futures unless they have something that goes to help found a brilliant future."

"You have your beauty," Michael Pannister said in a low voice. But he understood her only too well, for he knew that what was working in Elizabeth's mind was she wanted to get him on her side to urge Hester to make a large settlement of money on her.

It irritated Elizabeth beyond measure to have the feeling constantly upon her that she was beholden to Hester Slayde for everything she had. The more she made the advance into the world, the more she was remarked and admired, the wider the path opened to her to tread towards prosperity and victory, the more bitter were Elizabeth's feelings towards the truth of her position.

There was now no gratitude in her heart for all the wonderful goodness which this working woman was lavishing upon her. She began to be very irritable with Hester, and she knew so well just how to suggest without putting it into words that this sense of dependence (or rather what she called charity) was so trying to her!

But she was very subtle, was Elizabeth. She wanted this to come to Hester's knowledge in its fullest measure *not* through her, but to be brought to Hester Slayde's understanding by someone whom this good creature cared

for; and there was no one (and by this time Elizabeth satisfied herself on this point) for whom she cared as she cared for Michael Pannister.

But sympathetic as Michael was, and slowly but surely as he was yielding to the spell of her beauty and her personality, he seemed to be very obtuse where it was a question of working on Hester Slayde's simple and generous mind in the way that Elizabeth desired that it should be worked.

However, it was early days as yet: conditions were very agreeable with her, and she could afford to wait. Besides, although she was very anxious to bring Michael round to do everything she wanted, she also wanted to strike a little blow at Judith Winscott. She was so jealous of this other girl's assured position in society, and also she was bitterly envious because Judith had her own money and was therefore independent.

And then again, though she spoke so eloquently, and with so much admiration for Marcella O'Malley, Elizabeth was clever enough to know that Michael's mother was not really her friend. That she should make a future for herself with this very delightful, most attractive young man was never entertained by Elizabeth for one moment. Of course Michael might and possibly would come into some money when his grandmother died, but what Lady Pannister had to leave him would be nothing compared to what Elizabeth intended should belong to her.

Moreover, she wanted a title. She was very ambitious socially. She meant to use Michael Pannister as a stepping-stone, and her arrogant spirit demanded that he should render her the full homage which she decided was her due, but beyond that she did not go.

And on his side Michael was slowly but surely drifting into love for this very beautiful young woman. There were times when he struggled against the spell which he felt Elizabeth was beginning to exercise over him, when certain little glimmers of her real character and nature would creep out despite all her care, and send a little chilled feeling through him.

But he always found excuses for Elizabeth! He told himself that she must have gone through so much. His blood boiled when he remembered the story (she had invented) about the disgraceful way the American people had treated her, and of all the difficulties and the privations which according to her account, she had suffered when she had been with her father. And also he had felt something like anger against that dead father because Roger Charlbury had been evidently so cold and so unsympathetic with his own child.

In short, Elizabeth played on Michael's feelings and played very successfully.

Through Miss Winscott she had come in contact with various interesting and desirable people. Also little by little, the story of Sophia Martingate's bequest of all her wealth to her companion maid, and the story of how that maid had chosen to adopt a very beautiful girl (who would have been very dear to her mistress had she lived) paved the way for people to be extremely interested in Miss Charlbury, an interest of course which was enhanced and made very plausible when they came in contact with such a beautiful creature.

Now she and Michael sat talking for a while, and then Elizabeth got up and announced that she was going to put on her hat and they would be ready to go round and see the car. Michael had chosen one which he thought admirable, and at a very possible price, but almost at once Elizabeth rejected his choice, and she ordered one that would cost double the amount of money,

but which had the advantage of being the only one of its kind in the market, and so it would challenge all eyes when she drove about in it.

It was this kind of imperious touch about her which both attracted and repelled Michael. Of course he knew that Hester gave her *carte blanche*, but at the same time he thought that the girl ought really to have left such a big matter as the purchasing of a car for nearly two thousand pounds to the decision of the woman who was good to her.

But evidently Elizabeth knew her power. So the car was chosen and consequently Michael made no remark. As he took her back, however, to the house, his thoughts were both uneasy and unhappy, and after leaving her, he walked away in the direction of his own rooms with a curious sense of depression and a presentiment of trouble hanging over him.

Chapter XI

It was towards the end of September when old Mr. Briggs died. His will made something of a sensation, and all at once Jane and her brother found themselves the objects of considerable attention and interest.

Her father's illness had to a certain extent come between Jane and her friendship with Miss Winscott. She had to refuse all invitations, but Sir Henry's daughter had frequently made her way to the big house, and had spent many an hour talking with Jane Briggs and giving out all the sympathy that was stored in her heart.

She was so sorry for the other girl, and she was more sorry still for Gerald Briggs. About Jane there was a brisk, shrewd, business-like touch, but her brother was so different. In discussing these new friends with her father, Judith made a very shrewd remark. She said:

"I think Gerald Briggs and his sister ought to have changed places! He is much more impulsive: in a sense he is very emotional and Jane is so clear-headed, so strong, so practical, a splendid young woman! You liked her, didn't you, Daddy?"

"Very much indeed," said Sir Henry. And then he added almost involuntarily: "I like her almost as much as I dislike your other new friend, Miss Charlbury."

Judith opened her eyes.

"Why, Daddy, I thought you had lost your heart to Elizabeth!"

At which Sir Henry smiled a rather dry smile.

"I am past the age of losing my heart, my dear," he answered, "and I am a pretty keen reader of human nature, as I have to be in my profession. I don't like that young woman, Judith! and I am very sorry for poor Hester Slayde that she has taken such an incubus on her shoulders. You mark my words, Judith, Elizabeth Charlbury won't rest until she has made herself the mistress of everything that Hester Slayde possesses!"

Judith turned a little pale at these words, and when she spoke there was a little catch in her voice.

"Oh, Daddy," she said, "I'm so sorry! I don't like to hear you speak like that! I have such an opinion of your definition of people's characters . . . and—and I am very fond of Elizabeth."

"Yes, I know you are," her father answered, "and in my turn I am

sorry this should be so. Now, make a friend of Miss Jane Briggs. There you have something of sterling quality; a strong and a fine character. Have I seen the brother?"

"Not yet," said Judith. "Oh, of course I asked Jane to bring him when she came here, but he never came. I think she is a good bit worried about him. You see, this is such a vast amount of money. And he appears to be very undeveloped. Well, perhaps that's the wrong word; but he certainly does not seem to have any sense of the value of money, and I know Jane is terribly afraid he may get into bad hands."

"Are there no relatives? No kinspeople?"

"Oh yes, I believe they have plenty of cousins and that sort of thing," said Judith; "but these people seem to be so jealous because the old man didn't share his wealth with any of them: he left it all to his two children."

"And why not?" queried Sir Henry. "To whom should he leave his money?"

They were sitting at dinner when this conversation took place. Then suddenly Sir Henry put a question to her.

"Have you seen Lady Pannister lately?"

His girl shook her head.

"No, Daddy. You know she's not in town, she's down in Kent."

"Well, have you seen Michael lately?"

And though he was peeling an apple, he gave a very quick glance at his daughter, and he saw that the colour had rushed into her cheeks.

She answered him quickly.

"Oh yes, I see Michael very often. I saw him last at Mrs. O'Malley's studio. I told you, didn't I, that she gave a big tea for various people to see Miss Charlbury's portrait. Oh, Daddy, it is such a wonderful piece of work! Really it lives."

"Yes," said Sir Henry quietly, "I always did admire Marcella Brodey's work. I suppose she is going to exhibit this portrait?"

"I really don't know. I should think so," said Judith. "It ought to bring her a great deal of kudos."

"The reason why I ask you about Michael," Sir Henry said as he poured himself out a glass of port wine, "is because I have been having letters from the old lady. She seems to be very perturbed about her grandson for some reason or other. I thought she had come back to town, but I suppose you are right, and she is still down in the country. But he seems to have been neglecting her lately."

Judith Winscott laughed here.

"Well, you see, Daddy, he's very much in love! That's what happening to Michael."

"Oh!" said Sir Henry Winscott dryly, "that's what's happening, is it? In love, I suppose, with the beautiful Miss Charlbury?" He paused a moment, and then he said, "Poor Michael!"

Judith pushed back her chair and got up. She went round to him and kissed him on the brow.

"Daddy, I wish you wouldn't be so harsh about Elizabeth! Really, you ought to take certain things into consideration. She had such a hard time before she came here."

"Well, that's just why I do judge her a little stiffly, my dear," Sir Henry answered: but he spoke gently. "I think, having had a hard time, she ought to show herself a little more appreciative—shall I say?—of all that

has been done for her. I can tell you, my dear, she's costing Hester Slayde a pretty penny! You know I come in contact with old Sophia Martingate's lawyers from time to time, and they are certainly disturbed—there's no other word for it—about the way in which the money is being squandered. And now it appears that Miss Slayde has come to them saying she wishes to settle practically three parts of the money that is hers, on this Miss Charlbury! I suppose you didn't know that?"

"No, I didn't know that," said Judith. "I think it is very like Hester, but I am rather sorry to hear it because——"

"My dear, you needn't go on," said Sir Henry. He turned round and drew his daughter's face towards him and kissed her tenderly. "There are certain things in human nature which would be very difficult for you always to accept, my dear. Don't try to understand problems which are beyond you, and above all don't put a very human individual on a pedestal, because I'm afraid you will find that person will fall from the pedestal before very long."

. . . .

At the end of September Elizabeth went over to Paris with her chaperon, Mrs. Wakefield. And though she went through the pretext of asking Hester to go with them, she was extremely delighted when the other woman refused eagerly.

She made no friendship with her chaperon; but, at the same time, she was fully conscious of the importance of having such a delightful woman constantly about with her. Mrs. Wakefield was of a very old titled family, and it was rather a feather in the cap of Elizabeth Charlbury to have such a woman to take her about and look after her.

Whatever Mrs. Wakefield thought of this beautiful girl who had been put in her charge, she was very cautious not to share her opinion with anyone, in fact less with Judith Winscott than other people. She always told Judith that she could never be grateful enough for the thought which had put her in such a delightful home, and she always spoke enthusiastically of Miss Charlbury's beauty.

But Mrs. Wakefield knew the world so well that she found herself sometimes regretting the necessity which put her into such close contact with a nature so repellent to her as that which Elizabeth possessed. However, she told herself, it would be utterly impossible to make any change in such a young woman, and therefore she accepted all that belonged to her new surroundings, and proved not only a most delightful companion, but a very clever adviser.

It was when she returned from Paris that Elizabeth had the first disagreeable episode in her path of success. She had so worked upon Michael that he had almost involuntarily done what she wanted him to do with Hester Slayde, and when she went away the lawyers, she understood, were busy drawing up the deeds of settlement. Certainly Hester was going constantly to their office to discuss investments and all matters connected with the property which had passed to her, and so Elizabeth naturally imagined the settlement was being arranged too.

So everything looked rose-hued to the selfish heart of this girl until one day when she was shopping. She had finished her errand and was leaving a well-known establishment in Bond Street to enter her car, which had just been brought by the commissionaire, when she came face to face with Gerald Briggs.

She noted that he was quietly dressed, and that he appeared to be in mourning. But she also noted that he was just the same ugly, common young man he had been when she had made his acquaintance in Boulogne.

She was passing on with her head a little in the air, when he stopped her.

"Look here!" he said, and there was a definite threat in his voice, "I'm not going to stand for that! You've treated me like dirt! Well, I'm not dirt. I had a lot of money when I saw you last, well, I've a lot more now; and money counts with a creature like you!"

Elizabeth grew very white.

"How dare you!" she said in a low, hurried, almost choked voice. "How dare you speak to me at all! I taught you your lesson when I last saw you. Please move and let me pass."

"Not a bit of it," said Gerald Briggs doggedly. "I've got things to say to you, and I mean to say them. And you'd best make up your mind to listen. Is that your car? Well, you *have* got up in the world since I saw you! Mine was good enough for you then. Well, see here, you'd best get in the car and hear what I've got to say."

As it happened Elizabeth was alone. Mrs. Wakefield was not very well, and Hester had gone to the lawyers, and so she had ordered the car and gone out shopping by herself. She was glad now that there was no one to be a witness to this untimely and most disagreeable encounter.

She only had to look into Gerald's angry eyes and to realise that the young man intended to enforce his will to come quickly to a decision.

"There is nothing you have to say to me that I care to hear, but if you *will* force yourself upon me," she said coldly, "I suppose I have no alternative but to listen to you."

She spoke to the chauffeur, who was standing at the door of the car looking a little curiously at her.

"Go into the Park and drive round until I stop you."

Then she got into the magnificent car, and Gerald Briggs followed her.

"You seem to have hit it lucky," he said.

"If you can't speak to me civilly," said Elizabeth in a white rage, "I shall stop the car and have you thrown into the street."

At which young Briggs laughed a disagreeable laugh.

"Oh no, you won't," he said. "I know you too well for that! You don't want to have any scene, do you, my dear Elizabeth? You treated me, as I said just now, like dirt; well, you've got to pay for that. I'm not going to put up with such treatment. Who are you, Elizabeth Charlbury? Oh, I've been hearing things about you. I've been hearing how wonderful you are, and how beautiful you are. Judith Winscott's always talking about you to my sister. Well, she doesn't know you so well as I do; perhaps she wouldn't be so enthusiastic about your beauty if she could know what a mean, cruel beast of a woman you can be!"

The fact that he spoke the name of Judith Winscott sent a thrill of something like fear through Elizabeth. She suddenly determined to change her method of treating this very objectionable young man.

"My dear Gerald," she said, "you are very angry with me, and not very just. People are never very just when they are very angry. You ask Miss Winscott, or you ask anybody else if we put the case before them, to tell you whether I was a beast of a woman. I had to take care of myself, my dear Gerald. That letter you sent me was an insult. You said you were coming up to my room and that you would insist on seeing me. I don't know if you

have improved since that day, but I can tell you that not one woman in a thousand would have accepted such a threat quietly."

Gerald Briggs looked at her very quickly.

"Well, perhaps I did do wrong," he allowed; "but you see, you made me mad. I was not so wise to things then as I am now, Elizabeth. I've gone through a bit. I've lost my father . . . that churns up a fellow, you know. He was the best fellow that ever walked this earth, although he was a tradesman once. You sneered at him, I remember. Well, perhaps you wouldn't have sneered at him if you'd have known he was worth two millions or more."

"You measure everything apparently, my dear Gerald, by money," said Elizabeth, adopting a languid manner. They had rolled out of Piccadilly into the Park, and were going round as she directed. "I suppose two millions is a very nice thing to possess, but I have plenty of money of my own now, and one does not buy one's friendships, you know."

The boy—he was very little more—sat in the corner of the luxurious car, and was silent a while, and then he said almost gently:

"I don't know about buying friendships, but you've got me body and soul, Elizabeth! There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. Say, why do you treat me so badly? Everybody wants friends in this world, even if he has got a lot of money. I don't know anything about you except that you've been adopted by some old woman, and things are on velvet with you now, I guess. But even you, clever as you are, might need a friend. Why do you quarrel with me?"

There was so much common sense in this speech that it appealed to Elizabeth.

It was true, she was as he put it, on velvet, but the deeds of settlement had not been signed yet. For some reason or other, the matter was hanging fire and the lawyers were trying to persuade Hester not to make this settlement at all.

She was such an honest, open creature, that she even discussed this matter with Elizabeth herself, and it appeared that she was a good bit worried, because the lawyers had put the thought into her mind that perhaps she was not doing the right thing by her late mistress if she were to make over such a large amount of money to one who had been a comparative stranger to Sophia Martingate.

No argument could have been so strong to influence Hester as this, viz. that she was not being just or loyal to her dead mistress, and when Elizabeth had heard her stammer out that the lawyers had said she must not do anything in a great hurry, the girl could have struck a blow at Hester and let some of the impatient anger that was surging in her heart find an outlet.

So now this very practical appeal from Gerald Briggs touched her own commonsense and reasoning powers. What he said was so true! She might need a friend. What was there to be gained by quarrelling with this young man? Far better keep him dangling on as an admirer, one who could be extremely useful in the future if necessary.

So she turned now and she smiled at Gerald Briggs, and she held out her hand.

"All right," she said, "let's be friends. I am sorry if I hurt you. But you hurt me. You took a wrong view of me when I was alone in Boulogne, and one never likes to be judged in the wrong way."

The young man took her hand and gripped it so tightly that he made her wince.

"Say, Elizabeth," he said, and his voice shook as he spoke, "you don't know what it means to me to have you kind. Oh, my dear, there isn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for you! I know I'm not much to look at, but oh, I do love you, Elizabeth! I shall never love anybody else."

"You are a silly boy," said Elizabeth in the lightest way possible.

His adoration was by no means unpleasant to her, and the more quickly the thought flashed through her mind, the more surely she came to the conclusion that to send this young man and his millions out of her life would be the act of a lunatic.

So they drove on round the Park, but after a while she told him she must go back to her home, and he got out of the car, and he stood looking after it as she drove away.

To herself Elizabeth laughed a laugh of satisfaction and power. After all, he certainly did not belong to that part of the world in which she intended to reign as a queen; but until she did get this settlement carried through, she would be wise to build up a safeguard for herself, and Gerald Briggs' money might come in very useful.

As the door of the house was opened to her, she was met by Hester, a very flustered and almost frightened-looking Hester.

"My dear, I've got something I've got to say to you," Hester Slayde said, only waiting until the butler had disappeared down the passage. She drew Elizabeth into a room on the ground floor, a kind of library. "I don't know exactly how you'll take it, my dear," she said, "but there's a lady waiting upstairs for you in your boudoir. She's a very beautiful lady, but not young . . . and my dear, she says"—Hester caught her breath rather quickly—"she says as she's your mother."

The heart of Elizabeth Charlbury stood still for an instant, and then began to beat with most unpleasant rapidity. Her mother! Of late she had drifted entirely away from any thought of this danger coming into her path. Her mother!

She sat down suddenly, and she turned so white that Hester fussed about her.

"Oh, my dear, I'm that sorry. I'd have sent her right away, but you see I didn't know what to do. I . . . I . . . because . . . because, Miss, you see I recognized her."

Elizabeth looked up into Hester Slayde's agitated face.

"You recognized her! How?"

"Well, my dear, I've never so much as told you, but in that there box with all your father's letters to my dead mistress there was a picture too of his wife. And though she's a bit changed, she ain't changed that much I couldn't recognize her right away."

"Did she send in her name?" asked Elizabeth in a low voice.

"Yes, Miss, she did send in her name, but it isn't the same name as yours. See, this is her card," said Hester.

And she held out a visiting card which she had crumpled in her hand.

Elizabeth took the card. On it was printed, "The Countess Paulina Ninetti," and in the corner an address in Paris.

How long she sat holding that crumpled card in her hand Elizabeth never knew, but she was conscious not only of great anger, but of a sickening sense of dread. Though her father had never told her anything about his marriage

she had been shrewd enough to know that it had not been a very happy one. And here in the very start of her career, when her foot was on the threshold of success, this unknown mother had suddenly turned up !

And just for a few minutes she hesitated, then throwing back her head, she got out of the chair, and with a little hard laugh, she pushed Hester aside.

"You say she's in my boudoir ?" she queried. "Well, leave me to deal with her, Hester. She had not the slightest right to come here, and I mean to tell her that and to send her away."

Chapter XII

THE Countess Paulina Ninetti was sitting in Elizabeth's own pet chair. She was smoking a cigarette in a very long amber cigarette holder, about which there was a flash of diamonds.

On her first glance Elizabeth realized that she was face to face, not only with a danger, but with a very strong and powerful nature, perhaps even stronger, and far cleverer and more subtle than her own.

Just for an instant she stood leaning against the door before she entered the room.

And the mother and daughter looked at one another, appraising each other very swiftly. Then the Countess laughed.

"Well, my dear," she said, "perhaps you are surprised to see me ?"

Alizabeth answered her hotly.

"Yes, I am very much surprised. And I don't understand why you have come."

Her mother laughed again, a very charming laugh, put the cigarette holder to her lips for a second or two, then as she blew out a cloud of tobacco smoke, she said :

"I should have imagined you were not a fool, Elizabeth. I have made it my business to know a good deal about you, and it strikes me you've got your head screwed on the right way, my dear. Your present position is quite sufficient to prove that fact. You are very like me, Elizabeth," the Countess added in the same breath, "very like what I was when I was younger. And do sit down, my dear. I have a good deal to talk over with you, and I hate people moving about in a restless fashion."

Elizabeth turned on her with passion.

"You can have nothing to say to me that I want to listen to," she declared. "I repeat, you have no right to come here ! . . . I don't understand why you have come ! Having deserted me and left me all these years to struggle for myself, you might have left me a little longer."

"That's quite true," said her mother quietly, "but, as a matter of fact, I intend you to be very useful to me. If I have left you all these years, and you say it as a reproach, you must realize that that was your father's will. When we separated, he took you away from me and he declared that I was never to have anything to do with you. Well, to be quite frank, I never wanted to have anything to do with you ! I had my position to think of, my career on the stage, and as I was a very young woman, I did not intend to be known as the mother of a growing-up girl."

"You are on the stage ?" said Elizabeth quickly. "My father never told me that."

"I don't suppose your father ever spoke about me at all, or very rarely, did he?"

"It was not a subject which he cared to discuss," said Elizabeth with a sneer.

She scarcely knew why she had obeyed her mother's orders. Now she had sat down, and she had taken her hat off and flung it on to a couch near by.

"Yes, you are really very like me," said the Countess, screwing up her eyes. "And yet we are different."

She looked at a distance young, but she was extremely well made up. Her complexion was obviously artificial, but there was about her a languid grace, and a line of beauty which, against her will, Elizabeth was bound to recognize.

"I don't know that you are quite as attractive as I was, because you see, my dear Elizabeth, you do not possess any heart. You are what you look, a very cold, self-possessed, curiously hard young woman."

"And if I am," replied Elizabeth hotly, "is it to be wondered at? You're a queer mother, I must say, to come and criticize me in this way. And after all, it was all your doing that I should grow hard, as you put it."

"Oh no, my dear Elizabeth, it was not all my doing. Each person, you know, that comes into the world has his own individuality. You could have been a much sweeter, more charming young woman than you are. After all, though Roger and I didn't pull together, we were not blind to the qualities in each other. I have always given homage to your father's nature: he was not only a great man, a scientist and philosopher, but he had a very beautiful nature, Elizabeth. It's a great pity you didn't inherit that. He was never in love with me," the Countess added. "I think that was the reason why we actually came to a separation. Absurd of me to be jealous of Sophia Martingate, wasn't it?—but I *was* jealous of her! It is rather amusing to realize that you, my daughter, should be living here squandering her money, and parading about as a young woman of wealth!"

"I suppose that's why you come to see me," Elizabeth suggested with a sneer in her voice.

And as the Countess Paulina Ninetti stumped the end of her cigarette on an ash-tray standing near, she laughed.

"Of course, my dear, that's exactly why I am here. I am a very extravagant woman, and although I make an enormous amount of money when I choose to act, and I am just back from a very long and lucrative engagement in South America, I never seem to have any money."

"I am not going to give you a penny," said Elizabeth.

"Does that mean," inquired her mother in a languid voice, "that you intend to make me your enemy? Beware, Elizabeth! I am a far cleverer, much stronger, much more subtle woman than you are. . . . Keep me as a friend, my dear, and you will find me very useful, but make me an enemy, and you will regret it all the days of your life."

"I don't want to have anything to do with you," said Elizabeth passionately.

"Well, that's not the matter. That certainly is not the question," her mother answered her in the same languid voice. "I am here; you cannot get rid of me so easily. I need someone in my life to take care of me; someone in the background, and I am going to have you, my dear Elizabeth. I need money, and you are going to give it to me!" She paused, but her daughter made no reply, so she spoke on; "I have made it my business to

know pretty nearly all that has been passing with you," she said in her charming voice. "Therefore I am conversant with your peculiar characteristics and know a great deal more about you than I expect you realize. For instance, I happen to have, as friends, the American people to whom you engaged yourself for a time as a governess, just after poor Roger's death. They were great friends of mine when I was in New York a couple of years ago, and they are devoted to me. In the most natural way they gave me the story about the young woman, the daughter of a very celebrated scientist who died in Florence, and who they were only too glad to help, and all the objectionable matters which ensued from their very kind offices. I repeat, Mrs. Wilbur Skeldridge is one of my greatest friends. I always stay with them when they are in Paris, and they treated me like a queen when I was in America. When I heard of all you did with the husband—and William Skeldridge is a good-hearted, stupid man—and with the two boys, Esmond and Kenneth, I confess, my dear Elizabeth, I was not at all proud to realize that you were my daughter!"

Elizabeth was silent for a little while, then she turned round and faced that languid and graceful figure, so beautifully gowned, as she was quick to notice.

"What does this all mean?" she asked curtly.

"I just want you to know," said her mother with a smile, "that you cannot afford to quarrel with me. I can follow so well what is working in your mind. You want to get all that this old servant can be induced to part with, and then you want to fly sky high! You are very ambitious . . . you want to make a brilliant marriage . . . you want a title . . . you want to have a very safe position. Well, I don't blame you! You are undoubtedly beautiful, the type of woman who can twist most men round her finger. But it's not going to be such an easy game for you to play single-handed, Elizabeth! You help me, and I will help you. I'll hold my tongue about the Skeldridges, although they will be in London this autumn before they go back to America. You might run up against them, and that would be very awkward. Or I might put them on to you, which would be still more awkward."

"And you call yourself my mother," said Elizabeth, white to the lips with rage.

"Oh no, my dear," said the Countess Paulina Ninetti. "I don't call myself your mother. I am not proud of being your mother. I think in a sense you are too like me to to appeal to me, Elizabeth. If you had a little touch of your father about you, I might have experienced a sentimental feeling; but as it is, I'm not sure that I don't despise you, now," said the Countess, and she got up as she spoke.

She was as tall as Elizabeth, if not a little taller, and her figure was perfect. She was distinctly the more beautiful of the two women, despite the artificiality of her complexion and her obviously dyed hair.

"I am going to stay here with you, my dear," she said. "Oh, don't be afraid, you need not tell anyone that I am your mother. You can give out that I was a great friend of your father's, and hearing that I am in London, you have asked me to come here as your guest. I'm tired of staying in hotels. I'd like to be in a well-managed house, and I am perfectly convinced that this poor old servant of Sophia Martingate will know how to make me comfortable."

Elizabeth trembled with rage as she answered this.

"I don't want you here . . . I don't want to have anything to do with you. Do you understand, I won't have you here."

But her mother tapped her on the shoulder.

"Nonsense, my dear, you have no choice. I am coming here to stay, and I am going to have my friends here. And who knows, I may be the means of introducing you to just the type of man you desire to meet? You have been playing about with young Pannister, I understand. That's not good enough for you. Break his heart if you will, but don't make a fool of yourself where he is concerned. Now suppose we ring and ask Hester Slayde to come in? I don't intend to do anything without referring the whole matter to her. She is being amazingly good to you, and you are not in the least degree grateful. You are only out to get all you can from her. Well, it seems to me she needs protecting. And as I want care and comfort, and she is in a position to give me these things, I will protect her, and get her to protect me. What you have to remember, my dear Elizabeth," her mother went on very quietly, with a little laugh, "is that I am a very celebrated person. Ninetti is my name by marriage, but I am known all over the world by another name and one that you must have heard of. I am Paulina Amati."

As she saw Elizabeth's expression change, and noticed how the girl glanced at her quickly, she laughed again.

"Yes, I thought you would be surprised. Well, Paulina Amati is not a woman to be despised. You will find all London will be coming here when it is discovered that I am here. It will be an excellent business for you. Fortunately you have a very good-sized house. We shall not clash. I shall have my rooms and my car. And we will share—you can use my car, or we will go out in the very beautiful one which I understand has just been bought for you. In any case, my dear Elizabeth, *I am here to stay!* And you will please realize that I am not accustomed to have my commands disobeyed. Now ring the bell, and we will have Hester Slayde up. Poor soul, I frightened her out of her life! But I shall know how to soothe her. Though I can have as bad a temper as yours, my child, I have also a great deal of tact, and am genuinely adored by the people who wait on me either at the theatres, or hotels, or a house, so you need not be afraid I shall treat Hester Slayde badly."

Elizabeth looked at her mother for a second or two, then she turned on her heel and went towards the door. As she went out, she said:

"I leave you to deal with Hester. I will have nothing to do with it. I regard your coming as an insult, and nothing, nothing will make me change in my opinion about you. You are an adventuress, and I don't care a snap of a finger if you are Paulina Amati or not. I hate you . . . I hate you."

Chapter XIII

After her father's death, Jane Briggs went out of London. She had tried to induce her brother to go with her. There was a little country cottage which had belonged to her parents, where indeed her mother had died, and there Jane went to stay for a time until she had got over the sharpness of her grief. She mourned her father very deeply. There had been something

so pathetic about the old man. Despite all his money, he had remained so simple and so sweet hearted, and was devoted to his children.

Before she left town, she had seen Judith Winscott.

"I am going to ask you to do something for me, Judy," she said. "It's rather a queer thing to ask someone who is more or less a stranger. But I don't regard you quite as a stranger. I have learnt to know you. You are the dearest and best girl I have come across. I used to have some friends at school, but no one takes the place that you have taken."

"Thank you, Jane dear; I appreciate this more than I can say," Judith answered, and she kissed the speaker.

She was so sorry for Jane, and the girl looked so changed: all her brisk and almost pert air was gone. Her eyes were reddened with tears, and she had grown thin.

"What is it you want?"

"Well, look here! I want you to look after my brother. I know you don't know him very well, but I want you to know him better. Honestly, Judith, there is a lot of good in Gerald. I wanted him to come away with me, but still I can understand why he won't come. It would be precious dull for him down in the country. He's not a sportsman . . . he puts on golfing clothes, and he buys smart riding things, but they are all for show! He doesn't golf or ride. He motors a good deal, and all that, but Jerry has a lot to learn. How I wish Mr. Pannister would take an interest in him."

"Why," Judith Winscott said, with a colour rushing into her cheeks which always came when Michael's name was mentioned, "why, I'm quite sure you've only got to suggest that to Michael, and he will do anything in his power."

"Well, look here," said Miss Briggs, "I understand Jerry is going to stay on in the big town house until we sell it. I've always hated it, and I'm sure my darling father loathed it too. I don't really know what made him buy it, except I suppose he thought that we, his children, ought to have a very big house. Anywhow, it's going to be sold, and until it is, Jerry is going to stay there. I'd much rather know he was there, because there are one or two servants who have been a long time with my father, and they'll look after him. But he wants something more than servants, and that's where I thought you, and perhaps Mr. Pannister, might come in."

Miss Winscott answered this warmly: "Of course I'll do all I possibly can. I'll write to Mr. Briggs and ask him to come and have lunch with me, and then I'll get Micky to come too. Of course your brother is very young, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is," said Jane, and she spoke a little sadly. "I only wish there was an elder brother, or something like that. You see, I'm so afraid he'll do something stupid. Of course father's tied up the money pretty closely. We have a very fine income, but we can't touch the capital, which is a good thing: but it isn't the money I'm thinking about . . . it's my brother, and I'm awfully fond of him. I know he's not much to look at—he's plain; but Jerry has a good heart. And although I'm only two years older than he is, somehow I feel as if I were his mother! That's why I can't help worrying about him, I suppose!"

"You must not worry, dear," Judith Winscott said. "I quite understand how you feel, but you know youth has a way of passing; and if your brother gets in with a nice set of men, and makes friends, why, he'll be all right. You told me he was going to have a big tour on the Continent.

Don't you think it would be a good plan if you took him away, or at least if he had a year of travelling ? "

Jane seized on this idea eagerly.

" Why, of course, that's just exactly what I would like to do. I think we might make a party, and then go round the world." And then she kissed Judith warmly. " You are a dear ! And you must come to see me, and if Sir Henry will let you, do come and stay one week-end with me. It's just a little cottage ; but it's ever so sweet, and I love it."

Straight from that interview with Judith Winscott, Miss Briggs went back to the big house and inquired for her brother. She was told that Mr. Gerald had been in, but had gone out again. But he left word that he would be back to drive his sister down to the country.

Jane Briggs had intended driving herself in her own car, but she put this on one side immediately when she heard what her brother intended doing. And she looked forward to having a quiet and a very tactful conversation with the young man before they separated.

She was destined to be disappointed, however. Instead of his taking her into the country, a telephone message came through to say that Mr. Briggs had been detained, and that he was afraid he would not be able to go into the country with his sister. He left word, however, on the telephone to say that he would be down to see her in a very few days.

So Jane, after all, had her belongings put into the small car she generally drove, and took herself away from the big house, down to the little cottage which was to her the nearest approach to a home.

She would have been greatly agitated if she had known the reason why her brother had failed to keep his promise of driving her to this cottage.

. . . .

It was Elizabeth who had intervened. She never inquired as to the nature of the interview between Hester Slayde and her mother, but when she met Hester later, she was quick to notice the red eyes and the agitated manner of the little woman who was playing such an important part in her life.

There was an apologetic touch in Hester's manner as she spoke to the girl whom she was trying so much to love.

" Oh, Miss Elizabeth, I do hope as you won't be angry with me ! But I simply couldn't refuse your mother. She was so sweet spoke, you know, and she's such a beautiful lady, and when she told me what a great person she was and all that, why, I just had to agree to everything she asked me."

She had knocked at Elizabeth's bedroom door, and had come in in her rather timid way in which she always approached the girl.

Elizabeth had taken off her outdoor things, and was wearing a white silken wrap, embroidered with Chinese figures. She was smoking and was walking to and fro.

" Why do you come to me ? " she asked. " Are you not the mistress of this house ? What am I ? Only a creature kept on your charity. Now, don't whimper, please, Hester," the girl added sharply. " I am only telling you the truth. If you care so much about me as you pretend you do, you certainly would not have allowed yourself to be used in the way you are being used. This woman may call herself my mother ; I don't recognize her as such. A woman who deserts her child when a baby can hardly be considered a mother ! I don't know what *you* think about that ! "

Hester looked at the girl in a frightened, rather unhappy way. Her heart had gone out entirely to the Countess Paulina Ninetti. There had been such a charming touch about the way she had been spoken to. The Countess had only spoken the truth when she had told Elizabeth that she had the way with her that made everybody who served her adore her.

And just because, unconsciously, poor Hester was so often hurt by Elizabeth's cold manner and ready sneer, her emotional and sentimental nature had yielded at once to the warmth of such a charming woman as the Countess Paulina Ninetti proved to be.

For herself it must be confessed that Hester felt almost a wave of something like relief at the extraordinary change which the arrival of Elizabeth's mother brought into her life.

Between herself and Mrs. Wakefield, the chaperon, there was always a very pleasant understanding. Indeed, Mrs. Wakefield had the greatest admiration and almost affection for Hester Slayde, but there was nevertheless always that social barrier between them which prevented anything like friendship developing between them.

But somehow it seemed to Hester that great lady as the Countess Paulina Ninetti must be, there was nevertheless such a human note about her, and such a delightful way of addressing others which just went straight to the humble woman's own heart. She had of course explained to the Countess that there was a lady staying in the house whose province it was to act as chaperon to Elizabeth. And the Countess immediately agreed that it was absolutely necessary to keep this arrangement going.

"I don't profess to be a chaperon, my dear Hester. I am an actress, an artist, and I have always been very independent ; I am a free-lance. I could no more parade about with a young woman than the man in the moon ! So please, *please* let it be understood that this nice, charming Mrs. Wakefield remains on. I shall, myself, try to impress upon her how delightful I think it is for Miss Charlbury to have a chaperon of such social distinction. You know, Hester, although I am Elizabeth's mother, we are not going to parade our relationship. I don't particularly wish to be known as the mother of a grown-up daughter, because although I am no longer a chicken, I am supposed to be very much younger than I am. And that's very necessary, you know, when one has to play young parts, such as are still open to me. So I'm just a very dear old friend of her father's who she discovered was coming to London, and to whom she has offered hospitality, your hospitality, Hester."

Hester had shaken her head at this.

"No, ma'am," she said, "not mine. I'm just in the background. Everything is arranged by Miss Charlbury, and it's right that it should be so, because I'm quite sure it's what my dear mistress would have wanted."

The Countess looked at the speaker, then she bent forward and she kissed Hester.

"You are a good, sweet soul," she said, "and you deserve all the happiness that can come to you ! I don't know whether I shall be able to give it to you ; but if it lies in my power, believe me, you shall have it. You know you might have hated me," she added quickly, "because I was the woman who married Roger Charlbury. But I'm going to tell you something. His heart belonged absolutely to your dear mistress. There never was any woman in his life but Sophia Martingate. And I think it's more than possible if she had lived, though she and Elizabeth would have been miles

and miles apart in nature, she would have done for my daughter exactly what you are doing, so let that be your comfort. Now, my dear, let us talk over arrangements. I don't want to turn Elizabeth out of her room, but there must be, of course, another room suitable for me. I have my own maid; she has been with me for years. She won't make any trouble in the house: as long as she can be near me, that's all she wants."

And then in the most practical way, she had sat down and talked with Hester all the ways and means to let the joint establishment run as smoothly and as pleasantly as possible.

Chapter XIV

DESPITE the fact that there was a sullen, resentful anger smouldering in Elizabeth's heart in the days following on her mother's extraordinary, surprising appearance in her life, she had to confess that the advent of the Countess brought a sudden and unusual kind of movement, of interest, and even excitement into that life.

Though her mother had declared that she intended to go her way, and that Elizabeth need not come in contact with her, it was quite impossible for them to live under the same roof and not to meet frequently.

And there was about the way the celebrated actress conducted her daily existence a certain atmosphere of enjoyment, of pleasure, of gaiety, which really made a distinct appeal to Elizabeth.

Just for a little while she determined to keep herself aloof from her mother, and whenever she was called upon to speak about the Countess Paulina Ninetti, she always did so in a sort of deprecating way. For instance, when she took various of her new acquaintances to Marcella Brodey's studio, and she was constantly doing this in order to show them her portrait, she would always speak with a little shrug of her shoulders about this old friend of her father's who had appeared so unexpectedly on the scene.

Marcella questioned her son rather closely about this foreign Countess who had established herself in that charming house in Curzon Street.

And Michael told her that he had lost his heart entirely to Elizabeth's guest.

"Of course you know all about her, mother, don't you? She is the celebrated actress, Paulina Amati! I have always wanted to see her act! I wish she would take a theatre in London."

"Oh, very likely she will," his mother answered lightly. And then she inquired: "And is there a Count Ninetti?"

To this Michael had to confess he really had no answer.

"If she has a husband, I don't think he appears on the scene: she seems to be quite detached. Mother, she is the most fascinating creature you can possibly imagine!"

"What, more fascinating than Elizabeth!"

The mother watched the colour rush into her son's face. He hastened to answer this.

"Oh, she is so different from Elizabeth. You know Elizabeth is so aristocratic."

"So superior, you mean, my dear," said his mother with a little laugh. "Yes, I know exactly what you have in your mind. I think I shall have

to meet this very wonderful actress. Do you think you could bring her here?"

"I thought she *was* coming with Elizabeth? I know I heard it discussed at luncheon one day."

"Well, she hasn't been yet. But I am making a second portrait of your Elizabeth; she very kindly consented to sit for me as a model. It's a commission for an art gallery in Australia. My idea of Lady Macbeth. I've gone right from the Sargent picture, and I've made a number of studies. Here they are."

"But this isn't Elizabeth . . . this is such a cruel face, mother," Michael observed, as he looked at the various studies.

And Marcella looked at him.

"But, darling," she said, "don't you realize that Elizabeth *is* cruel! Look how she is treating Hester. I understand that she had very nearly persuaded our poor Hester to make a very big settlement of money on her, and then as this has fallen through, Elizabeth is showing what I call the real ugly side of her nature to the woman who has been so amazingly good to her."

Michael Pannister sat down. He put aside the study he had in his hand.

"You know, mother darling, you don't realize how it hurts me when you say all this, because——"

"Don't go on," said his mother gently. "Because you have lost your heart to this girl, because you are making excuses for her all the time, and because, my darling, my precious boy, your eyes are blinded by her beauty. Now just stop and reason with me, Micky dear. You don't know how I've been fretting about you all these many weeks. I have seen it coming. Elizabeth possesses a spell which she has cast over you. You are changed even to me, and as for your friendship with poor little Judith! . . ." The speech was not finished.

Michael got up and moved about the room. He lit a cigarette, smoked it, and then flung it away. And then he said with a little hard tone in his voice:

"Well, my dear mother, a man must grow up some time or other! You have kept me your baby boy for such a long time, you know, and I confess I have not wanted to see anything more except what I have seen through your eyes, but there comes a time——"

"I know it," said Marcella quietly, "and I suppose each person has a right to shape out his own destiny as far as he can."

"Well, you know," young Pannister answered, with still that same little hard note in his voice, "it always strikes me as being—well, what shall I say?—rather obtrusive of other people to try to suggest the proper sort of wife, or the proper sort of husband, even to their children. Surely, in marriage above all things, there should be an individual selection?"

"Quite right, my dear," said Marcella. "Now tell me something about your grandmother. I hear she is very poorly. She is still down in Kent, isn't she?"

Michael's face changed at once, and he looked like his old self again.

"Yes; well, I'm awfully sorry to say Gran is really very seedy. She managed to get a nasty chill, and she doesn't seem to be able to throw off the effects of this. I go down there pretty often to see her. She seems to be ageing too. I never knew what her age was; I always supposed she was younger than Aunt Sophie."

"On the contrary," his mother answered, "she was many years older. Of course you only remember Sophie Martingate as a crotchety, queer old woman, but I remember her when she was full of life. Though she was never handsome, she was most attractive. She had a sort of sunny nature," Marcella said thoughtfully; "she had always been very much kept under by her elder sister—your grandmother, and they were so entirely apart that they were bound not to be in sympathy one with another. But I don't believe Sophie ever disliked her sister as much as your grandmother hated her."

"Gran can hate too!" Michael put in here in a low voice.

His mother nodded her head. "Yes . . . and when I look back and think of Sophie, when she was in love with Roger Charlbury, why it makes my heart ache, even though she is now in her grave. I'm glad you go down to see the old woman. I am sure that must do her good. She is very fond of you, Micky dear. I wish there were something I could do for her. I have no reason to love her, but after all she was my dear Ted's mother, and that gives her a big place in my memories. By the way, as she is down in the country, I suppose she has not yet seen Elizabeth?"

"Oh, I took her down one day; we motored. I think it was a very successful visit," Michael said. "Gran seemed to lose her heart to Elizabeth. She told me afterwards she thought she was the most beautiful young woman she had ever seen. Of course all those qualities which don't appeal to you, appeal to Gran. She doesn't care for people who wear their heart on their sleeves, you know. She likes proud and rather hard natures, I think."

"And how did Elizabeth like her?" queried Mrs. O'Malley.

"Oh, I think they were mutually attracted to one another. Judith has been staying down with Gran, you know. It appears she has a great friend, this Miss Briggs, whom I know very slightly, living in a cottage down there quite close to Gran. Jane Briggs is an awfully nice girl," said Michael "and I am sorry for her. I suppose people would laugh at me if I told them that, because Jane Briggs is something of a millionairess! But she happens to have a brother who is rather a trouble to her—very unfledged, rather of the young cub description of young man. Judith was asking me if I could do anything to influence this young Briggs, who seems to be drifting into perhaps the worst elements in London Bohemian life. But I am afraid we haven't a thing in common. I did seek him, and I asked him to come to lunch with me, but he can't talk about anything except his money, and he has evidently got his head turned, for people are running after him right and left. You can guess how bad this is for him. I for one am not a bit surprised that his sister is worried about him."

"Yes, we women with hearts," said Marcella, not without a little bitterness, "do worry rather unnecessarily. You see we always want everything of the very best for those we love, and we want, without being intrusive, to lead our dear ones and at the same time not to let them know they are being led. I suppose I fail in that?"

Michael got up, went over to his mother and wrapped his arms about her.

"Darling, darling, darling," he said, "you must *not* be cross with me! And you must not be bitter: it is not like you to be bitter! Do you think I don't understand all that is stored in your heart for me. Mother dearest, I am in love with Elizabeth . . . I am dreadfully in love with Elizabeth, but I know it's a hopeless love."

His mother looked up at him, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Why do you say hopeless, Micky dear?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What have I to offer her? She is a very ambitious woman; she has told me so. I have nothing; I'm just dependent on Gran. I earn a little bit of money, it is true, at this secretary job, but I can't give Elizabeth what she wants."

"You can give her love . . . you can give her companionship . . . you can make the world full of sunshine through your sweet and loyal nature, Micky."

"Well, I thought all that in the beginning," the young man answered, "but I know better now! I have no chance. I am not going to marry anyone. I think, mother dear, before very long I shall cut out all that I have in my life now, and go abroad. I'm rather sick of this kind of sedentary existence. I'd like to go out to a ranch life, or something that's big and broad and manly."

"Well, why not?" his mother said bravely, though her heart quailed within her. "You and Peter are just a pair! All the time he's saying how he would love to go into the big, wide, open spaces somewhere. I shan't be surprised if one of these days I hear he has taken himself off and the two boys with him. I'm sure he would have gone before this, if he had felt he could uproot me. But I must live in London . . . I must live in this old studio. I . . . oh, Micky, I am very stupid, but I think sometimes I want the moon!"

"Well, don't we all want the moon?" said Michael Pannister, and he took her in his arms and kissed away her tears. "Now don't, don't get depressed, mother darling. You know you have never done better work than you have done this year. Why, Elizabeth's portrait alone has brought you no end of commissions, you know that."

"Yes, I know that," said his mother, a little petulantly, "but I loathe portrait painting." Then she dried her eyes, and she laughed. "I'm a cheerful sort of object! Take me out to lunch. Peter has gone off to Ireland for a couple of days to see some of his own people. I'm going down in the afternoon to see the boys, bless them! They have a half-holiday, and they always look forward to seeing either Peter or myself."

"I'll drive you there, mother dear. Now go and make yourself look smart. Where shall we go? Oh, I know, we'll go to the Embassy; one always sees amusing people there."

"But I'm awfully shabby, Micky. I have no smart clothes."

"What do smart clothes mean when you are a genius? Besides, you always look too sweet for words!"

"Oh, Micky!" his mother said between tears and laughter, "how like your father you are sometimes!"

Elizabeth's mother was lunching at the celebrated club that day, lunching with a very good-looking American man. He was one of her steady adorers. Wherever she went, it seemed to her that Franklin Oppenshaw always turned up sooner or later.

Of all the pretty, smart people present at that luncheon hour no one was more beautiful, or more exquisitely dressed, or attracted more attention than Mr. Oppenshaw's delightful companion. But that was the way with Paulina Amati. She always drew all eyes wherever she went. She was in a thoughtful mood this day.

And Franklin Oppenshaw looked at her from time to time with some anxiety.

"I guess you have bitten off more than you can chew, my dear," he said. "Say, why do you go on with it?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"We women are queer people," she said. "Perhaps I have been cherishing a dream all these years? Perhaps I have been telling myself, Franklin, that I have missed out the biggest part, despite all my successes? Perhaps I have had mother's yearnings and rushes of tenderness for the child I deserted?"

"Why, that's all very natural, my dear," the man answered. "You've made me understand that over and over again. But I did my best, when you asked me years ago to try and find out something about your husband, and your little girl, and I have kept in touch at your request with your daughter, and I've always realized you were destined to be disappointed. And now you know it. Why do you go on with it? It's distressing you, Paulina. I guess I know you pretty well by this time, and I can read your thoughts, well just as if they were written in black and white! You are not one little bit happy in that house with that cold, hard, jealous bit of flesh that you call your daughter. Why do you stay there?"

Elizabeth's mother looked at him, and she smiled, and when she smiled, she was very lovely.

"Well, I'll tell you frankly—I'm not staying on because of Elizabeth. As you very rightly have told me, I've learnt my lesson. I dreamed a dream, and it's just faded into nothing. There's a whole ocean of difference between my daughter and myself . . . we shall never cross that ocean. But I've lost my heart to that poor, humble, dear, good creature Hester. She loves me."

"Why, that goes without saying," said Franklin Oppenshaw. "Don't all the world love you, honey?"

"Oh yes, I know I have been loved by many, but Hester loves me as few people of her class have loved. And do you know why? It's because I talk to her so kindly about the old woman whom she nursed through so much illness, and who left her the burden of all this money. Years ago I was jealous; yes, I was jealous of Sophia Martingate because I could never put her out of Roger's thoughts. Do you know, he didn't want to marry me? I guess you find that pretty difficult to accept, Franklin, because you're just crazy where I am concerned, but it's the truth. Still, I just intended that he *should* marry me! Well, I got my way, and a nice mess I made of it for him and for me. He loathed the stage, and everything to do with the theatre. I don't say he denied my talent, he couldn't; but he was determined to keep me away from the theatre, and I was just as determined to go on with my career, and so we drifted apart. And through all my triumphs (and you know I have had triumphs!) I have always had at the back of my mind the thought that I must come into Elizabeth's life and do my duty; even at a very late date. Well, I have done that, and see where I am!"

"I'm not going to let you fret your life away over this girl" Oppenshaw said quietly. "You are going to let me take care of you, Paulina, right away; promise me that?"

"Oh, I'm too old to make promises, my dear man. And besides, I have had two marriages and they have been very great failures. Roger was the

one to suffer in the first marriage, but I was the one to go through purgatory in the second. Surely you have not forgotten all that I suffered through Rudolph Ninetti ? "

As she saw the man's face contract, she put out her delicate hand and laid it on his arm.

" I ought not to have said that to you, poor Franklin. Well, Rudolph is gone, and I am free. But I'm not ready to give any promises, my dear. In fact, I am very unsettled ; I don't quite know what I'm going to do. I wish I could understand my daughter better."

At that moment her eye was caught by Michael Pannister, and she smiled and bowed. And then she said under her breath :

" Now mark this young man who is coming towards us. You have seen him once or twice. His name is Michael Pannister, and he is the nephew of old Sophia Martingate, and everybody imagined she would leave her money to him. He is to be pitied, Franklin, because he has lost both his heart and his head to Elizabeth."

She greeted Michael with her most charming smile, and held his hand in hers while he nodded to Oppenshaw. And then she looked across to the table from which he had just come, and said :

" Something tells me that that lady is your mother, the wonderful artist. I must go and speak to her."

" Oh, I'll bring her to you," said Michael quickly.

But she refused this. She got up from the table and went across to Marcella, and they clasped each other's hands. Almost at once they felt in sympathy.

Chapter XV

The year rolled on. Christmas came and went, and the Countess still lingered in London, despite the fact that the English winter was extremely trying to her.

Between herself and Michael's mother there had sprung up the warmest and the most sincere friendship ; in fact, it may be truly said that the Countess was never more happy than when she was sitting and smoking and talking with the artist in her studio.

But though they became quite intimate, there was one subject which was not touched on between them, and that was the subject of Michael's love for Elizabeth. It seemed to be tacitly understood between them that it was a matter upon which they would prefer not to speak.

As a matter of fact Mrs. O'Malley was seeing less and less of her son. It is true that Michael had to go down constantly into the country to be with his grandmother, for Lady Pannister, after being an extremely strong, healthy woman practically all her life, had become almost a confirmed invalid, and the doctors considered it was wiser that she should live in the country, but this was not the only reason that kept them apart.

Jane Briggs, too, remained on in the country. She went up every now and then to town just to see the big old house which would not be sold for some time to come, but she was so worried about her brother and his ways that she always went back to the cottage with a feeling of relief.

If she could have exercised the slightest control over Gerald Briggs, it

goes without saying that Jane would never have left him. But the fact was that she realized as each day went by, her brother had slipped right out of her sphere as it were, and seemed to have nothing in common with her, and for a time at least she determined that the best thing she could do would be to keep out of his way altogether.

In her heart of hearts Jane was conscious of a great disappointment when it became apparently impossible for Michael Pannister and her brother to become friends. She scarcely realized how much hope she had put into her mind in this connection, but it was very evident that the difference between Mr. Pannister and her brother was too great to be capable of being bridged.

Now and again Jane of course had communications from the firm of lawyers who looked after her affairs as well as her brother's. But they refrained from telling her anything about Gerald Briggs and his doings, although she felt convinced that they must be out of sympathy with the way in which he was throwing his money about.

But one day, just before Christmas, she received a letter from the firm informing her that it would be necessary for her to go to London to see them. The fact was that the arrangements her father had made for the disposition of his fortune rendered it impossible for either Jane or her brother to deal with their capital or to change the investments, or do anything with the bulk of their money without reference to one another.

And when she wrote back and asked for a little further explanation why it was necessary for her to go to London, she received a letter informing her that Gerald Briggs had been to the lawyers (who were also trustees) and had told them that he wished to draw out a very large sum of money, though he did not inform them for what purpose he required to dip into his share of the capital so largely.

Of course Jane Briggs being very shrewd, had come to the conclusion a long time ago that there was some influence working in Gerald which was inimical to his well-being, and possibly was hostile to herself.

There were times when she found herself wondering whether he had outgrown his strong feeling for the young woman who, according to his own account, had treated him so badly in Boulogne. But in this matter Jane always put a curb on herself. She was quite convinced that if she began to discuss his doings with her brother, she would make an open breach between them. And as she knew this would have been a great grief to her father (and in a sense it would have been a sorrow to herself) when they did meet, which was very seldom, she only talked lightly on casual matters.

At Christmas time she had filled the cottage with some cousins who were poor, and who were only too glad to accept her hospitality. She tried to induce Gerald to come down and join her party, but he refused.

"I'm not such a mug as you are!" he had said to her on the telephone. "I'm not going to let these hateful people from Yorkshire get everything they can out of me! Why don't you come back to London? Let us open the house and have a jolly time."

To this his sister had replied a little sharply.

"My dear Jerry, I'm not out to have a good time, not just yet anyhow. Do you forget it is only a few months really since father died?"

"Of course I don't forget," the boy answered hotly; "but at the same time, one can't go about draped in crêpe perpetually."

It was from Judith Winscott that Miss Briggs got outside news of her brother.

To her pleasurable surprise, she learnt that Gerald had drifted into the habit of calling up Miss Winscott on the telephone, and proposing jaunts. Also that he had lunched and had tea with Judith on several occasions.

Once she put the question to her girl friend.

"How on earth do Jerry and your father get on?"

To this Miss Winscott had replied:

"Well, to tell you the truth, my dear Jane, they don't meet! You know father is a broadminded man, and all that, but he doesn't go entirely with the set to which Jerry belongs."

"But how do *you* get on with that set?" inquired Jane bluntly; "to tell you the truth I can't see you falling into line with my brother's views."

The other girl laughed, and said just a little bitterly:

"I sometimes think I have been a bit of a prig! I mean that it is better to go with the rest of the world as it is lived to-day. But don't get wrong ideas into your head, Jane. I don't frequent night clubs, and places of that kind as yet. I just go out to dinner occasionally and dance a little afterwards."

"And do you see much of your beautiful Miss Charlbury at these clubs and places?" Judith inquired, after they had talked on a little further.

The hesitation in the other girl's voice before she answered was very eloquent to Jane.

"No, I see very little of Elizabeth these days," the other girl answered. "You know, of course, that she is tremendously in demand, and everybody is rushing after her; more especially since that delightful Countess has come to live with her. In fact, I'm half inclined to believe that people are much more interested in the Countess than they are in Elizabeth, which is rather strange, because Elizabeth is much younger, and I imagine more beautiful." Then Judith Winscott changed the subject. "When are you coming to town, Jane?"

This same question was put to Miss Briggs by another person on one very cold, bleak afternoon when, as he was driving away from a visit to his grandmother, Michael Pannister caught sight of her walking with her dogs along the muddy lanes. He pulled up the little two-seater, and got out.

"Can I give you a lift?" he asked.

Jane shook her head with a laugh.

"Oh no," she said, "I came out for a good long tramp, and I am going to get it! How is Lady Pannister? I hope she is a little better."

"I'm afraid she isn't," Michael said, and he spoke very quietly. "I am very unhappy about her. She seems to be unhappy herself. You know Gran has always lived what I call rather a lonely life, Miss Briggs. She's always been all-sufficient for herself, and I suppose that has cut her off from a great many things which come to ordinary people."

"Well, she has got you, anyhow," said Jane, and she spoke softly.

She liked him immensely, and each time that she met him (and now and again they met when he came down to see his grandmother) she felt that she drew a little nearer to him. And she regretted more surely each time she saw him that it was so impossible for him to be a friend to her brother.

"Yes, she has me, of course," Michael agreed, "but I'm not much, you know. I only wish she would see my mother! But she has always been terribly hard and cruel towards my mother. She didn't approve of her because she was an artist and this made her furiously angry when her

son married. Gran has never known my mother! She's the sweetest creature in the wide world, Miss Briggs."

"I know she is that," said Jane, "because I have heard such a lot about her from Judith, and the only few times that I have met Mrs. O'Malley, my heart went right out to her. You are looking very tired," said Jane abruptly. "Are you working very hard?"

He shook his head.

"No, as a matter of fact I am out of a job. I gave up the secretarial work, because I suddenly took it into my head that I would go abroad. Then I had to change my mind. I saw it was going to fret my mother terribly."

"Where were you going? And what were you going to do?" asked Jane.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I really don't know. I was going to consult Sir Henry Winscott. But then when Gran fell so ill, and I knew I was going to churn up mother so terribly, I let the matter drop, so I am doing nothing. Just running around," he said, "in a very useless kind of way."

Then he spoke on the impulse of the moment.

"Look here, Miss Briggs! Do you mind if I say something to you? It is about your brother. Your friend Judith said you would be very glad if we could strike up a friendship. Well, I did try, but Mr. Briggs wasn't taking any! I fancy I am a bit too slow for him; but really and truly, he does want someone to look after him. He is still very young and not very wise, and he is in with a very bad set . . . to use a slang expression, they are all hot stuff."

"Don't I know it," said Jane Briggs a little bitterly. "Look here, will you come back with me and have a cup of tea? Or are you in a great hurry? I should like to talk to you about Jerry."

Michael accepted her invitation with alacrity.

"I shall love a cup of tea, and I adore your cottage. Have all your friends gone?"

"Yes, thank goodness! That does not sound very hospitable, does it? but they were cousins with whom I was not very much in sympathy. They grudge us our money, and though I tried to do the best I could for them, it wasn't a very successful undertaking. You shall drive me back as far as the cottage."

They got in the little car and went very slowly so that the dogs could trot after the car. And when they were inside the old-fashioned, rather low-roofed sitting-room, with its bowls of flowers and a big log fire blazing on the hearth, Michael walked up to it and gave a sigh of contentment.

"Now, this is what I call a home," he said. "There is exactly the same atmosphere in this room that my mother has in her studio. It is so comforting and restful," he sighed, and then he said: "Everything that surrounds Gran is so stiff and uncompromising, as it were. She hates fripperies, and she tolerates only flowers about the house. Do you know, it's a funny thing, Miss Briggs, but I believe she's fretting over things that were done in the past, and which cannot be undone!"

"Oh well," said Jane, "that's the kind of thing that happens when people get old. It was just the same with my father. I know—though of course he never really properly lived after my mother died—I know he regretted so much all that he had meant to do, and never did! But he was

the most wonderful father, Mr. Pannister. I wish you could have known him. Now make yourself at home, and smoke as much as you like. I will go along and hurry up my handmaid with the tea." As she spoke Jane threw off the rough coat she was wearing, and flung the cap belonging to it on to a couch.

"I'm afraid I have stopped your wonderful tramp," said Michael.

"Oh, I can always have a good long walk, but I can't always entertain a very interesting visitor. I won't be very long."

When she came back she was followed by a middle-aged woman bringing in a tea-tray. And then Jane crouched down in front of the fire, and began to toast the crumpets.

"I always toast them myself," she said. "First of all I soak them in milk, and then I put plenty of butter on them. I hope you like crumpets?"

"I adore them," said Michael.

He realized once again that Jane was most attractive. As has already been said, there was something bird-like about her, she had such quick movements, and though her voice could be sharp-toned, it also could be very soft and charming. To-day he found her quite pretty, and even though his mind was full of the beauty and the fascination exercised over him by Elizabeth, he could not resist giving a tribute of admiration to this other girl.

As she sat toasting, Jane looked up at him.

"Oh, how I wish you could have been friends with Jerry," she said half wistfully. "Of course I know there could be nothing in common between you . . . but——" She broke off and then she said: "I am afraid he's making a mess of things. I have to go up to see our lawyers this week; they are apparently rather perturbed about his doings. What sort of people is he with, Mr. Pannister?"

"Oh, a very poor lot, as I have already told you. Composed, I am afraid, of a great many hangers-on. Because, as I dare say you know, your brother is terribly generous—much too generous, in fact. I hear that no one goes to him and is turned away."

"All slackers, I suppose?" said Jane rather bitterly. "Who are they?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't suppose you would know the names if I could think of them. But I do happen to know that a certain young man, a South American film actor called Benito Querita (possibly that isn't his real name), is very intimate with your brother. Querita is a handsome creature and is just making a big name for himself on the screen." Michael laughed slightly here. "They tell me that every woman he meets is madly in love with him!"

Jane frowned, and then she said:

"Well, if he is making money, what does he want with Jerry?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that," said Michael Pannister. "All I do know is that Mr. Briggs and this Dago chap are almost inseparable. And to my mind he is not the most desirable friend for anyone so young and inexperienced as your brother is."

"Benito Querita," Jane repeated. "Of course I have heard that name, but Jerry has never spoken of him to me."

She got up here, buttered her crumpets, putting them down in front of the fire to keep warm. She had flushed rather hotly, and now she was very pale.

"Sometimes," she said in a low voice, "I am glad my dear father is not

alive." She paused again, and then she asked suddenly: "Oh, Mr. Pannister, what *shall* I do? You see, though I am not frightfully old, still I have my head on my shoulders and I am a *little* more sensible than Jerry. Of course I have no authority over him, but I am so terrified of being separated from him altogether that I have had to hold my tongue. Oh! I do wish he had a good man friend."

"I'll tell you what," said Michael Pannister suddenly. "You know the person to get hold of him and talk to him like a Dutch uncle is the Countess Ninetti. You know who I mean?"

"Rather," said Jane. "I never think of her as an ordinary woman; I always think of her as a great actress." Then she looked at Michael. "You mean to say you think she would bother herself to take an interest in my brother?"

Michael nodded his head.

"I do. She is a very fine woman. We have had many long talks together, and I like her views on life and on people generally. Although she and Miss Charlbury don't exactly pull together, I really believe she is a very good influence for Elizabeth, and as for Hester Slayde, she simply adores the Countess."

"Oh well, it is worth thinking about," said Jane. Then she changed her tone. "And how is the beautiful Miss Charlbury these days?" she inquired. Her tone was very light, although in her heart she felt that she was touching on a serious matter, for in a curious sort of way, though she really knew nothing beyond what she knew about Elizabeth through Judith Winscott, she had the feeling pressing strongly upon her that this very beautiful young woman was destined to bring a good deal of unhappiness into the life of the young man who was sitting so comfortably in her pet chair, making himself at home with the dogs.

She noticed that his expression changed, but he answered her just as lightly.

"Oh, I believe she is going on very much as usual. The only thing that has happened is that she and the lady who was her chaperon have separated. Elizabeth has made up her mind she does not need a chaperon, and I suppose that's all right since the Countess Ninetti is living with her. But I think . . ."

He did not finish the sentence, and Jane held out a cup of tea. As she did so, she said:

"Now you can put in your own sugar and milk . . . and mind you eat your share of the crumpets."

After a little while she put a question to him.

"Have you seen Judith Winscott just recently?"

He shook his head, and then he laughed.

"I hear Judith is coming out of her shell, and that she has taken up dancing enthusiastically. Are you fond of dancing?"

Jane nodded her head.

"I just simply adore it," she said. "At least I did. Now I am not going to any dances. Well, I dare say it is very stupid of me, but I'm not in the mood. You see, I can't forget Daddy just yet awhile."

"You never will forget him," the young man answered her gently. "You are not the forgetting sort, I am quite convinced of that."

A little later, when he rose to take his leave, he gave a sigh.

"I'm awfully sorry to go away from here. What a charming home you have! So quiet! And so beautiful! Lovely and yet simple. I must

bring my mother down to see you. I wish I dare take her to see Gran, but that would be a desperate business, and might do a great deal of harm to the old lady. Isn't it strange how people make their own unhappiness ?" he added. "There has been so much in Gran's life to give her satisfaction and contentment, but I know now she's always been a disgruntled, and even an unhappy woman all because she has persistently held such mistaken views about people. Well, thank you so much for your tea, and your hospitality, and do let me come again."

As they clasped hands, Jane felt a little thrill run through her.

"Come whenever you like," she said. "Except that I am going up to London for one day, you will always find me here."

She went to the door to see him get into his little car, and waved her hand to him as he started.

And then she went back, and she sat in the chair where he had sat, and the most curious sense of ecstasy passed over her. Then she got up, and shook herself, and she made saucers of tea for the dogs, and laughed at herself a little bitterly.

"I'm a fool!" she said. "I think this comes from living too much alone. I expect I had better change matters, and perhaps I had better brace myself up and see what I can do with my queer kind of a brother."

Chapter XVI

THE very day that Jane went up to interview her father's lawyers, Michael Pannister sought an interview with Hester.

He had not been going to the house so often as he had done, and Hester reproached him when he went into her sitting-room, the smallest and the most humble room in that smartly furnished house.

"I was thinking as you was forgetting me, Mr. Michael," she said. "What's come to you? You haven't been nigh us for so long. The Countess she was asking the other day where you was."

"I've been going backwards and forwards to the country, you know, Hester," Michael said. And then he added: "Gran is very ill. I have brought you a message."

Hester looked at him: she grew a little pale.

"Me? Her ladyship sent a message to me?"

The young man had nodded his head. He had kissed her, and now he had put his arms about her.

"Yes, Hester," he said. "Gran has sent you a message. She wants to see you . . . she wants you to go down as soon as you can." And then Michael said a second time: "Hester, Gran is very, very ill, I am afraid."

Tears rushed into Hester's eyes. She clasped her hands. They were no longer work-stained, but they were broadened with all the work she had done: the hands of a capable, practical woman.

"Oh, Mr. Michael," she said, "that gives me a pain. I didn't so much as imagine as her ladyship was that bad. And she wants to see me, my dear? What can she want with me?"

"Who can say?" said Michael with a faint smile. "No one knows the

working of Gran's mind, and though I go to her so frequently—in fact, I stay there most days—I am as far from being near her as I ever was. You will go, won't you ?"

Hester looked up at him as she brushed away her tears.

"Why, of course I'll go. But, please, won't you go with me ? It's all very stupid of me, and I know as her poor ladyship is that ill, but I've always been afraid of her. She's so sharp spoke, you know, and she did treat my poor dear so cruelly."

"I don't think she means to be cruel," Michael Pannister said quietly. "I don't know what she has in her mind, but I am perfectly sure she won't try to hurt you. Well, when shall we go ? She wants to see you very soon. I'll take you down by car, I think. You won't be afraid to drive with me, will you ?"

Hester smiled through her tears.

"No, my dear, I'm not afraid to go anywheres with you," she said. "I'll just go and speak to the Countess. She's in, I know, and I don't like to do anything without first letting her know. She's that kind to me, Mr. Michael."

"I know she is," said Michael gently.

And then he asked, with a little catch in his voice, if he could speak to Elizabeth.

Hester shook her head.

"I don't know where Miss Elizabeth is," she said. "She went out to lunch . . . we don't see very much of her these days, and I'm right down sorry as she is still so bitter with the Countess, who really would be her friend if only Miss Elizabeth would make up her mind to let her be." Then she said : "I'll be back directly, sir. But perhaps you'd better come into some other room ? This is just my little sitting-room, you know."

"That's why it's so nice," said Michael gently. "I like to be where you have been."

So he remained standing on in front of the fire in that humble little room, and his face was very grave and rather sad.

He was thinking about Elizabeth and himself, wondering how it would all end. Sometimes she was kind and sweet to him, and at others she made him so unhappy. And it seemed to him that, despite the fact that she had promised to marry him, there was always a great barrier between them.

For instance, she would not permit him, as yet, to regard the engagement as anything very binding. She put the matter on the ground that until there was something definite in his future, she did not think it was a wise thing that they should announce their engagement to the world, and here of course Michael had to agree with her.

As a matter of fact he sighed very deeply as he stood looking about the little room where Hester lived, and he regretted, not for the first time, that he had given up his secretarial work. At least that had brought him a little income and might have led to something more important, but he had burnt his boats in that direction. It was a dreadful business. He did not want to allow this to himself, but he felt quite convinced that what was working at the back of Elizabeth's mind was the fact that she quite expected that his grandmother would die very soon, and then when he would come into all Lady Pannister's money the way would be clear before them.

His grandmother's illness had of course put a very big barrier between them of late, because he had been compelled to be so constantly out of town.

But in any case Michael felt very much out of things when he had to dance attendance on Elizabeth, for like herself, he was dependent on other people. Now he had nothing except the allowance his grandmother gave him, and even that caused him much bitterness of spirit. He could not hope to compete with the other men who fluttered about Miss Charlbury and lavished gifts upon her. His poverty, in fact, at times made him very bitter.

And though he detested the idea of looking ahead as to what would happen when his grandmother was gone, it was only natural that now and again this thought would linger in his mind. Money meant so much to him where Elizabeth was concerned! He was still deeply infatuated with her. She held him by her coldness, by her capriciousness, and of course by the spell of her beauty.

And yet at times there would come over Michael that longing for something warm, something human, something sympathetic, and these qualities were never to be found in Elizabeth.

It was a pleasure to him to take care of Hester now, to instal her in the car, and wrap her up in the big warm fur coat which the Countess had insisted upon lending her.

It was a strange thing that Michael always felt warmed and consoled in a curiously vague way whenever he came in contact with the Countess Ninetti. Also, in a curiously vague way, she recalled Elizabeth to him, but at the same time she was so different.

There were tear-stains on Hester's face as they drove away.

"The Countess, she's that dear and sweet to me, Mr. Michael, that she is! How I wish as my poor dear mistress could have known her."

And then Hester talked a little bit about Mrs. Wakefield and regretted the departure of the chaperon.

"I was real sorry when Miss Elizabeth and she quarrelled, but I wasn't surprised; I saw it coming."

"What happened?" queried Michael. "I had an idea that, if they were not great friends, they understood one another."

Hester gave a deep sigh.

"I don't quite rightly know what did happen, Mr. Michael," she said, "but they hadn't been pulling together for some time. I think Mrs. Wakefield, she tried to advise my dear Miss Elizabeth about some things. I don't exactly know what was wrong, but they decided to separate."

And then Hester turned very red and blurted out the trouble that was stored in her heart.

"I have been most unhappy, Mr. Michael," she said. "You know I was going to make things quite all right for Miss Elizabeth, and I'd meant to settle all the money I possibly could on her. But it wasn't to be, because the lawyers they was dead against it; they pointed out that it would be very wrong of me to do this. For you see, my dear, after all, Miss Charlbury never did know my dear mistress, and I understand now just as if she'd put it in writing, or said it to me, as my poor dear she left me the money not to be used in a foolish and a wrong way. And it would have been wrong, I see that now, my dear, to have put so much money in a young girl's power. But when I had to tell Miss Elizabeth as things had fell through," said Hester, "well!"—she caught her breath in a sigh—"life hasn't been too pleasant, Mr. Michael, because you know Miss Charlbury she can be terrible hard when she's angry."

Michael shivered a little as he drove along, and it was some time before

he answered. Of course he was in the midst of the traffic, and he had to be very careful—that was not the reason why he remained silent. It was that once more he felt rushing over him that curious longing to have Elizabeth different, to find some sweet and good qualities in her. But whichever way he turned, though people did not speak openly, he was conscious of the fact that there was no real heart in this beautiful creature who had promised herself to him as his wife and the future companion of his existence. It seemed to Michael as if the outlook was robbed of all sweetness: that it was indeed full of trouble and even of unhappiness.

. . . .

When they reached the old Elizabethan house (which Lady Pannister had bought a good many years before) Michael had to first of all take Hester into a room, and let her get thoroughly warm, and then he had to comfort her. And then he had to take her up the broad staircase himself, and usher her into the sick-room.

She was trembling from head to foot, and the usual healthy colour in her cheeks had faded out.

Lady Pannister was sitting propped up in bed. She looked shrunken and very old, but there was still fire in her eyes.

"Leave us, Michael," she said to her grandson. "And come here, Slayde. My good woman, don't shake like that! I'm not going to hurt you. I've got something I want to say to you."

Michael gave Hester a little push, and patted her on the shoulder.

He went away obediently, and he wandered about the old-fashioned house restlessly. He wished that Hester had not spoken to him as she had done about Elizabeth. It was no news to him; he had already heard from the girl's own lips how bitterly she judged Hester, and how harshly she regarded the change of plan.

He tried to smoke and calm himself as he waited for Hester to come down. It seemed to him that she was a very long time up with his grandmother, but in a little while he heard her footsteps on the stairs, and he went out to meet her.

Hester was crying and shaking with sobs, and the young man just took her in his arms and led her into the drawing-room and put her into a big chair right in front of the fire.

"Now you are going to have some tea," he said, "and you are going to rest. I don't know really whether I will take you back to-night."

It was some time before Hester could speak.

"Oh, Mr. Michael, I must go back. There's something as her ladyship wants me to do. I gave her my promise, and I must keep my promise."

"Very well, my dear," said Michael, and he took one of her trembling hands in his and patted it, "of course you shall keep your promise. But I'm not quite sure that I won't take you back by train. You know it's a very long drive, and it's very cold, and the wind is pretty bitter to-day."

He asked no questions. As a matter of fact he thought it more than possible that his grandmother's interview with Hester had some reference to her dead sister. And he found himself hoping that if this was the right solution of what had passed this day, it had been possible for the old woman upstairs to speak with some kindness of the sister whom she had treated so cruelly in the past.

But whatever had taken place between Hester and Lady Pannister was no revealed to him.

And it was a very excited and tired woman whom he conveyed back to the house in Mayfair, and helped up the stairs to her own room.

Elizabeth happened to have just come in when he and Hester arrived. She lifted her eyebrows as she saw them together.

"You have been travelling, Hester?" she asked, "and you've got on the Countess's best coat! My, you are smart!"

"She's very tired, Elizabeth," Michael said quietly. "She's been into the country, and she's rather upset."

"Been into the country!" The girl looked at them a little more curiously. "That's something new for you, Hester, isn't it? Oh, well," she said impatiently, "I'm not going to bother you with questions. After all, it is no concern of mine, and I don't really care one pin what you do or where you go!"

"I shall be down directly, Elizabeth," young Pannister said. "I want to speak to you."

"You will have to hurry then," was the answer, "because I am going out again. I am dining very early and I have a very full evening."

But it was some time before Michael went down again, for Hester was really in a state of collapse. The interview with Lady Pannister had evidently tried her beyond description, and she was undoubtedly worn out with the journey and with the emotion from which she was suffering.

So Michael sat with her some time, and when he got downstairs and asked for Miss Charlbury, the butler informed him that that young lady had just gone out again.

Hearing his voice, the Countess Ninetti came to the top of the stairs.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Pannister," she said. "Can you spare the time for a little chat? Just for a few minutes?"

Michael turned at once, and went up the stairs.

She took him into the room which had been made into a sitting-room for herself.

"I just felt I must see you because I am leaving London very shortly," the Countess declared. "In fact, I'm not sure that I shan't be going away within twenty-four hours."

"Going away!" said Michael.

She nodded her head.

"Yes. I am rather tired of London, and apart from that I have had a very wonderful offer to go back to the States, and I think I shall decide to take it. I have been idle a very long time, Mr. Pannister, and as I have quite recovered from the fatigue of my South American tour, and I'm always happier when I am working, I guess I shall fix it up. You missed Elizabeth?" she queried a little abruptly.

He nodded his head.

"Yes, she told me she had a very early dinner."

"Sit down," said the Countess Paulina Ninetti, "and smoke. I dare say you prefer your own cigarettes?"

She was looking very beautiful, but rather fragile, in a house dress of some clinging dark blue and gold material. She pushed forward a chair, and sat in another.

"I've been wanting to have a chat with you, my dear, for some days." She paused, and then she asked him a question. "I am wondering: Do

you know a certain young Argentine man called Querita ? He is a film actor now, but he was on the stage a year or so ago : in fact, he was for a time a member of my company when I was in South America."

Michael looked at her with a little surprise.

"Of course I know whom you mean," he said, "but I have never met Mr. Querita."

The Countess smiled.

"Your state is the more gracious. He is a handsome creature, but utterly worthless. I had a visit from him a few days ago. When he was acting with me, he did me the honour to admire me, not very discreetly, and I had to put him in his place, so I was therefore very much surprised to see him when he appeared here. I am afraid—— " she began, and then she changed her tone : there was a note of gravity in her voice. "Michael," she said, "be warned ! I am only an onlooker, but I see a great many things, and what I see does not always seem to me to be right or wise. My dear, I like you very much ! And I am worried about you ! You are wasting your life chasing a butterfly. This butterfly is a very lovely creature, but it *is* a butterfly and nothing more."

Michael Pannister stiffened, and held his cigarette unlighted.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you, Countess," he said. "You are speaking of Elizabeth and of my affection for her. Perhaps you will forgive me if I answer you very frankly ? You were, I understand, an intimate friend of her father's—at least that is what Elizabeth has told me." He paused, and took up a match from a stand near by, but he did not light his cigarette : his voice was not quite steady as he went on : "I may be wrong, but somehow I have the impression that you are not very well disposed towards Elizabeth."

"My dear Mr. Pannister," the Countess answered him very simply, "in my life I have done my share of wrong things, I suppose, and I am sure I deserve a great many reproaches ; but, believe me, you wrong me in this matter. I have tried to be to Elizabeth the best friend any woman could be to another, but I have failed." She stubbed the end of her cigarette as she spoke, and then she looked him straight in the eyes. "I did know her father very well," she said, and now there was emotion and pathos in her voice, "and it is because I knew him so well, and because I knew the splendid qualities there were in him, that I had hoped to find some of these qualities in his daughter. I trust I am not going to hurt you very much, my dear, but I am afraid I must confess I have been bitterly disappointed in Elizabeth."

Then as he got up very quickly, she added :

"Ah, I *have* hurt you !—I am sorry."

Michael threw away the cigarette he held, and he answered her just a little sternly.

"Please forgive me, Countess Ninetti," he said, "but you must not speak to me of Elizabeth in that way. Don't forget that I love her . . . she has promised to be my wife."

The Countess checked a sigh.

"I know all that," she said. "But though I may make you angry, I venture to say that that is a promise which Elizabeth Charlbury will break as easily as she would break a toy if it suits her purpose to do so. And that is how I judge her character."

The colour rushed into Michael's face. He turned on her rather sharply.

"But why should you judge Elizabeth?" he questioned coldly. "After all, you don't know her very well. You have only come into her life just recently, and I am afraid you have been prejudiced against her. I know she has had that feeling in her mind ever since you came here."

The woman facing him sat back and looked at him with affection in her eyes. In every way Michael Pannister appealed to her, and when she spoke, which she did after a little pause, there was infinite pathos in her voice.

"My dear," she said gently, "I am going to give you a surprise. I am going to tell you the truth. I am not prejudiced against Elizabeth—I only grieve about her—for, you see, Michael my dear, I am her mother!"

. . . .

That night Michael Pannister made one of his rare appearances at a certain fashionable night club. He dined at a very modest restaurant and went into the club of which he was a member, about ten o'clock.

Elizabeth was dancing with a very handsome young man who had a Spanish look. She had evidently been dining at a table presided over by Gerald Briggs, who was laughing in a rather stupid way and drinking champagne freely. His guests were, as Michael described them, a mixed lot: they were certainly not the class of individual with which young Pannister associated as a rule.

But he sat down when Gerald hailed him and made himself as agreeable as possible. The other members of the party joined the dance and he sat on trying to make conversation with Gerald Briggs, but in reality watching Elizabeth and Benito Querita. They were a perfectly matched couple. Querita danced as only a Southerner can dance.

It seemed to Michael Pannister that he was seeing an absolutely new Elizabeth! One infinitely more beautiful than she had ever appeared before. She was alive in every sense of the word, and in her animation she seemed to have grown younger and more appealing. She was laughing and talking as she danced, and Querita had the air of a man under a strong spell.

"They go well together, don't they? But Ben isn't going to hang on to Elizabeth all night. I can jolly well tell him that. He's got to dance with the others and leave Elizabeth to me!"

There was a peevish tone in Gerald Briggs' voice. His words, the suggestion of proprietorship, brought a rush of colour into Michael's face and a wave of anger into his heart. He noticed how most of the diners, those who were not dancing, centred their attention on Miss Charbury and her partner. It was not exactly jealousy that came into his heart, it was a pain: a sense of helplessness and a great desire to stand before all the world and protect this beautiful girl.

A man at a neighbouring table was discussing Elizabeth as if she were a horse, and he had something sneering to say about her partner.

"She looks clean bred right through, but I suppose, like the rest of the women, she's lost her head about this young Dago. He can dance, I'll say that; but if there isn't a touch of the tar brush in him I'll eat my hat!"

All this was said by a heavy, middle-aged man smoking a powerful cigar. "Queer thing," he went on, "how the nicest of girls seem to go off the deep end about a chap like this!"

"Oh!" said another man, and he laughed, "not much fear of danger with that young woman. She's got an ice pack for a heart and her head's just about as hard as this table: she can take care of herself, can the Charlbury beauty!"

"Think so?" queried the first speaker a little dryly. "Well, just guessing I should say you are all out in this: at least judging by her look. Watch her when she comes round again."

The anger in Michael Pannister's heart almost overcame him. It was torture to him to have Elizabeth discussed in this way casually, and even greater pain to feel that the second speaker was right.

There *was* a look in Elizabeth's face that he had never seen there before, and his pulses quickened. He must get her away from this. Now that he knew all there was to know from her mother, he felt a greater tenderness fill his heart where this girl was concerned.

For the Countess had not spared herself. She had spoken with the deepest remorse of the past, telling him that having followed her career as an actress she had renounced everything that belonged to her duty as a mother and a wife. And though she had tried to warn him, she had also tried to make him understand that the hardness, and the worldliness, and the bitterness which were so discernible at times in Elizabeth were perhaps the outcome of this girl's strange upbringing; an upbringing for which she, the mother, was responsible.

When the music finally stopped after innumerable encores, and Miss Charlbury and her partner came back to the party, Gerald Briggs was in a very bad temper.

"Say, Ben, you ought to take up dancing for the clubs as a profession," he said to Querita. "I guess you'd make quite as much by your dancing as you do on the film."

The other man only laughed. But there was a gleam in his eye which did not disguise the fact that he was quick to anger.

"Ah, my Jerry! You are just a little jealous, that's what's the matter. It's your turn now, only you must let Miss Charlbury rest awhile. That was a most amazing dance, but she must feel a little tired."

But Elizabeth showed no sign of fatigue. She did not appear to be listening to what was being said; she was looking at Michael Pannister, and speaking in a cynical voice.

"Why, what *has* happened to you, my dear?" she said. "The monk coming to a night club! Does that mean that you are going to renounce your saintliness and turn to the flesh pots once more?"

Michael was looking at her with all his heart in his eyes.

"Elizabeth, will you dance with me?" he asked not very steadily.

She shook her head.

"No, my dear," she said. "I must dance with Jerry Briggs. Can't you see he is in a vile temper? He's an odious little vulgarian, but one can't accept his hospitality and not do something for it. But don't worry about me, Michael, please. I'm all right. Trot along, my dear; it is time you went to bed."

"Why do you sneer at me?" said Michael in a low voice. "Don't you know how much you hurt me?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and turning round swiftly she accepted a cigarette which Querita held out to her, and lit it from the one which he was smoking. Then she turned back to Pannister.

"I am awfully sorry, Michael, my dear," she said in a drawling voice, "but the fact is I can't help sneering. You see I am rather a cruel individual. I'm not sure it does not give me pleasure to hurt people." Then her face changed, and her eyes flashed with anger. "Who sent you here to-night?" she asked in a hard tone.

He answered her evasively.

"Must I be sent? Can't I come of my own accord?"

"You hate these places," she said. "You never do come. Confess now. Were you not sent?"

"Who should send me?" queried Michael quickly.

She puffed out a little smoke: it went directly into his face.

"I don't know," she said, "but I have a kind of intuition that you have been talking to my delightful guest, and if so you have been hearing all sorts of ridiculous things about me. You were still in the house when I left for dinner. Confess now, have you not been sitting with the Countess? And has not she been talking about me?"

Michael answered this quite simply.

"Elizabeth," he said, "she is very troubled about you, and she cares for you far more than you can possibly understand. She has told me of the tie which binds you together."

Elizabeth flung the cigarette she was smoking on to the table. Her face flushed and then went very white.

"How dare she!" she said in a tone of rage. "How dare she! It was a bond; she was not to speak about it. What right has she to speak? She parted with that right a great many years ago. She is nothing to me, and I am nothing to her! And I think it perfectly shocking that she should have dared to speak to you on such a matter."

"You are very angry, but you are not very just," said Michael. "She is about the only one person in the world now who has the right to speak about you, especially when she knows what you are to me . . . and that we are going to be man and wife."

At this juncture Gerald Briggs got up and came towards them.

"I say!" he said, "you two are talking away as if you were discussing a sermon! What's the matter? Come on, Elizabeth. It's my turn to dance; the dance is just beginning."

"I'm going to sit out this dance," Elizabeth answered him coldly. "You can sit with me if you like, Jerry," she said, and she looked straight into Michael's eyes.

There was defiance and a cruel kind of expression in her eyes.

"You look bored stiff, my dear," she said. "You really ought to go home. We don't want anyone with us who hasn't got the party spirit, do we, Jerry?"

But young Briggs was in a peevish mood.

"I say! Why won't you dance with me? You kept on for ever and ever with that chap Querita; it's my turn now. You've got to play fair, Elizabeth, you know."

She frowned very sharply, and then she gave a laugh, and a shrug of her shoulders.

"Righto," she said. "Come along. Let's get it over."

She passed Michael Pannister without a word, but over her shoulder she laughed at Benito Querita.

"You'll have to come and rescue me," she said.

And then she was whirled away into the crowd of dancers.

And Michael Pannister found himself standing by the table feeling rather foolish. He rejected an invitation to sit down made by one of the other women present, and giving a bow all round, he walked away to the entrance. And Querita watched him with a sneer, and yet a touch of envy on his dark face. There was about Michael a note that with all his beauty he would never attain.

The night air was refreshing, and even welcome to Michael Pannister as he let himself out of the hot crowded club. There was an ache in his heart, and a feeling of contempt for himself. He had sat and talked a long time with Elizabeth's mother that late afternoon, and he had found his heart going out more and more surely to her.

It was evident to him that she was really moved by the deepest anxiety and distress about her daughter, and yet that she was powerless to move as she longed to move in the girl's life. She had let him know that nothing could give her greater pleasure than to hear that Elizabeth and he were married; but at the same time she conveyed, perhaps unconsciously, the suggestion that there could never be any happiness, for him at least, in such a marriage.

And this feeling was paramount with Michael Pannister this night. She had told him that he was chasing a butterfly, yet it seemed to him that there was something even more worthless than a butterfly in the young woman whom he had just left.

And he found himself wishing almost passionately that he could break away from this infatuation, take his life in his own hands, and live out that life unfettered by thought of Elizabeth Charlbury, or dread lest he should lose her.

Chapter XVII

After a broken and practically sleepless night, Michael turned to the thought of going away from town once more with a feeling of immense relief. He had tried to sort out all the complicated feelings which pressed on his heart and his mind.

But the more he went over the question of Elizabeth and her strange nature, the more hopeless the outlook became. And now that he had seen with his own eyes the type of people with whom she mingled, and above all had realized that she was playing some very strange game in which Gerald Briggs was concerned, Michael felt there was every reason for him to get away from London.

The Countess Ninetti had gone. She had sent him a little note by hand early the morning after his excursion to that night club, in which she told him that she was leaving for Paris at once. He hastened around to the house, but the Countess was already gone.

And Hester was shedding real and bitter tears. Everything had been made so much pleasanter and easier for her when Elizabeth's mother had been on the scene. It was so natural for Hester to love someone, and Michael had to agree that the Countess Ninetti was a very lovable person.

Though the shadow of death hung over the old house in Kent, he knew that it gave the old woman who was lying there a sense of pleasure and satisfaction to know that he was so near.

When he went out, somehow his footsteps always turned in the direction of the little cottage where Jane Briggs still lived. By this time they had become quite friendly. They were easy together, and they found they had so many interests in common; in fact, Jane took upon herself somehow the duties of a sister.

She scolded Michael. She told him that when the opportunity came he must go out into the world, and make a stand for himself.

"I don't care whether you are going to have money or not. Money! I hate money. Look what it is doing to my brother!"

Michael was silent a minute, and then he looked at her with a little whimsical smile.

"Well, if he is wasting his substance, you are doing wonderful things with yours."

The girl coloured.

"I can't do half enough," she said. "Oh, sometimes I wish my father had never made this fortune! When I look back to our childhood, I remember such happy times. Of course it does ease my heart a good deal to give to charities, but I'd like to do so much more than I can."

This was said one afternoon when Michael Pannister had found his way to the cottage. It was just two days before his grandmother died.

It was a glorious spring day. In Jane's garden primroses were springing up, and violets were scenting the air. It was almost warm enough to sit out of doors. As it was she had the windows flung widely open, and the dogs trotted in and out from the garden.

And then her servant brought her a telegram.

She apologized for opening this, but she was a long time before she seemed to get to master the contents. And Michael looked at her half curiously. She had turned very pale.

"This is from my lawyers. They say they must see me at once. I have put off going to town as long as I could, but this sounds urgent, so . . ." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll have to go, though I hate leaving my cottage home even for a few hours."

"Can I come with you?" said Michael.

He made the offer on the spur of the moment because he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

She thanked him gently.

"I don't think you can come away. It might upset Lady Pannister." To this Michael agreed.

"Yes, I forgot. I can't leave her just yet awhile. But look here, do let me know if there is the smallest thing I can do. Please ring me up on the telephone. I'll manage to get to town somehow, if it is only for an hour or so."

Jane thanked him with her eyes: she was struggling to get full composure. It was evident, however, that she was tremendously agitated, and even unhappy. As she gave orders for the car to be brought round at once, and told her maid to pack some clothes for her, she walked to and fro the length of the long room.

"What am I going to do with Jerry?" she said. And then on the impulse she said: "You know, there is one way in which you could help me, Mr. Pannister."

"What is it?" asked Michael quietly.

"Well, I got a letter the other day from the daughter of one of our lawyers.

She is a very go-ahead young woman, rather emancipated, always going about with a troop of people jazzing and all the rest of it, but I think she is fond of me. She has tried so hard to get me into her set, but I haven't wanted to. I suppose there is something lacking in me? I think I ought to have been a boy, and Jerry ought to have been me. Well"—she was still walking to and fro—"well, this girl, Esmé Langton, wrote to me confidentially and told me she thought I ought to know she was afraid that Jerry was making an ass of himself! It was not enough that he was flinging money about right and left, and causing a great deal of anxiety to the trustees, but that he was evidently infatuated with . . . I am going to hurt you, Mr. Pannister," Jane Briggs said, and she said it quickly.

"I believe I know what you are going to say," Michael Pannister answered; "he is infatuated with Elizabeth Charlbury; isn't that it?"

Jane nodded her head.

"According to Esmé, she is giving him a rotten time, making him look a fool, and yet dragging him about at her heels, here, there and everywhere. She says, too, that he is lavishing money on her, and spending a fortune on jewels. Perhaps—perhaps Michael—I feel I must call you Michael," Jane added quickly—"perhaps *you* could speak to Miss Charlbury? I'm perfectly convinced she doesn't care for Jerry; she *can't* care for him! Besides"—Jane turned away as she said this—"I have always imagined, and so has Judith Winscott, that you and Elizabeth are engaged."

"We are not engaged," said Michael. He spoke in a dull tone. "I could not ask her to tie herself to me. What have I to offer? I am a pauper. Do you think I am building on what this poor old woman is going to leave me? Oh, you are right, money is hateful! What you tell me makes me very unhappy. Since I have had to come down here so much, I seem to have lost Elizabeth. Whenever I go to her house, she is not there: and Hester knows nothing about her movements. I simply can't understand her, but I am not going to judge her too harshly. Perhaps your brother is at fault, and he has been dreaming a dream? If so, then Elizabeth cannot be blamed for that. When a woman is as beautiful as she is, it is only natural that men should fall in love with her."

Jane gave him a very quick glance. She realized how loyal he was, and her heart went out to him.

"Well, I am sorry you cannot come with me," she remarked, "but you must stay here, because I understand that your grandmother gets weaker every day, and you must not be away in case you are needed."

Her maid came down and announced that the suitcase was packed, and that the car was at the gate.

They walked down the path together, and as they shook hands, Michael held Jane's hands just a little while.

"Now promise, you will let me know exactly what is happening? and what I can do? I do hope you are not going to be worried unnecessarily."

"I'm going to be worried, that's certain sure," said Jane in her usual brisk way, "and in a sense it will be unnecessary."

Then she gave him a nod, got into the car, and the next moment she had driven down the road, having called out to her maid to tell her that the gardener-chauffeur must come and take the car back from the station.

All that evening Michael Pannister sat listening for the telephone to ring, but no bell sounded. And he went to bed rather late, asking himself, as he had done so many times of late, what he was going to do in the future.

By now he was very well convinced that whatever motive it was that had prompted Elizabeth to get so far as permitting him to look upon her as belonging to himself, it was certainly not affection. The spell she exercised over him was as great as ever, and yet there was a difference.

It hurt him to have to confess that his mother's views with regard to Elizabeth were justified, and also that all the Countess had said to him, and she had spoken very freely, was equally justified. Both these women, who were so alike in one sense, and so unlike in another, had told him that he was making a great mistake.

It was natural that his mother should judge Elizabeth harshly, but it must be confessed that the young man was considerably impressed by the fact that Elizabeth's own mother had summed her up so justly.

He looked for a letter from Jane the next morning, but there was nothing, only a few hurried scribbled lines from his mother asking him to ring up and give her the latest news.

He got through that day somehow, and he was tempted more than once to go to the house where he knew Jane Briggs and her brother would be. After all, she had promised, and he knew he could rely on that promise, she would let him know when, or if there was something he could do.

And so another day wore to an end, and he sat reading very late until it was time to go upstairs to bed. He had fallen into a heavy sleep from which he was roused early the next morning by Lady Pannister's own maid calling to him to get up.

But though he hurried to put on some clothes, by the time he had reached the old lady's room, she had already passed away.

Everything that had to be done, Michael did. He got in touch with the solicitors, he made all arrangements for the funeral, and he did not get up to London until quite late that night. Then he went direct to his mother, and as he took her in his arms and kissed her, he felt once again that revivifying influence which Marcella always brought to him.

"It was a very easy thing, dearest," he said. "Thank God, she didn't suffer! She just sighed away."

"I wish I could have seen her," the mother answered, and there were tears in her eyes. "After all, she was Ted's mother, and she did adore him. I ought to have understood, but it was not until you came, Micky, that I knew exactly what she must have felt."

"I would have let you come," the young man answered, "only she really was not conscious. She slept the greater part of the time."

"And now you are going to rest with me a little, aren't you?"

But Michael shook his head.

"No, dearest. I want to go and see Hester. I promised her I would see her. And I want to see Elizabeth . . . I haven't seen her for days."

His mother seemed as if she were about to say something, but she checked the words on her lips. Instead of which she kissed him and sent him away.

"Go and see poor Hester. This is sure to upset her. What a splendid creature! What a fine nature! There's a woman with a soul. You know," Mrs. O'Malley added, "I rang up the house when I got the news through to-day, but I was told I could not speak to Miss Slayde because she had gone out." She gave a sigh and kissed him tenderly.

"Now if you must go, my dearest one, don't let me keep you. Only, Micky dear, don't get worried or upset. I am so anxious about you!"

He laughed as lightly as he could.

"But you are always anxious about me, dear one," he said, "and really I am as right as rain."

Chapter XVIII

JANE BRIGGS had gone direct to the big house in London when she had arrived in town, and once there she had spent at least an hour telephoning in all directions trying to get in touch with her brother.

Apparently, however, Gerald was not to be found anywhere, so when the lawyer who had telegraphed to her was announced, she went into the library to see him by himself.

He had a good deal to tell her, but his reason for asking her to meet him was that her brother had approached the trustees and had told them that he desired to draw out a large sum of money and would not give them any reason why he desired to have this money.

"You know," the lawyer said to Miss Briggs, "he cannot do this unless he gets your consent. I think you must have a talk with him. It's all very well, he's a very wealthy young man, and although he has overdrawn at the bank and has squandered his money freely, he has still a very big income coming in. But we can't possibly agree to let him draw out this big sum from the capital unless we are given some idea as to why it is wanted and we have your consent to the transaction."

Jane Briggs possessed a fighting spirit, and she was also a thorough woman of business, although she was so young.

"Well, I've got to know a good deal more before you get that consent. Now what we have to do is to bring Jerry to his senses. Of course this money is his, and if he is going to put it to any good use, well, we can't exactly stand out. But is he going to put it to a good use? What does he want such a big sum of money for? Hasn't he told you anything?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"No, he's as close as an oyster! But I fancy there is some woman in it. As a matter of fact, I think he intends to get married and he wants this money to settle on the woman who is going to be his wife. And if so that alters the case considerably."

"Well," said Jane Briggs slowly, "of course he is of age, and he can marry if he wants to. But as I have just said we have got to know a little bit more. And I *must* get in touch with him. I have telephoned all round London, but I can't find him anywhere."

"I am told," the lawyer said slowly, "that he has been sharing a flat just recently with a young American man called Querita. Did you get on to that?"

Jane shook her head.

"No, that's news to me. That's how he chucks his money about, having various flats in various places! What a fool he is! Oh!" the girl said half brokenly, "I thank God my father is not here! It would be such a sorrow to him to see how Jerry is behaving."

Then they talked on for a little while, and parted with Jane promising to let the lawyers know as soon as she had got in touch with her brother.

Although she had played her part so cynically and with so much self-control when she had quite unexpectedly come in contact with Michael Pannister at the night club, the meeting had left Elizabeth very disturbed.

As a matter of fact things were not going in the direction she had expected. It was all very well to have Gerald Briggs hanging round her and lavishing so much upon her, but she had grown to hate him.

And although she was conscious that another influence was getting a tremendous hold over her, Elizabeth still kept sufficient of her old self in hand to provide her with strength to fight strenuously against the spell which Querita exercised over her. It was in fact the first time that this girl had ever felt anything like a sense of love or weakness where any man was concerned, and so it was that she struggled and fought against it.

Somehow, too, when she had contrasted Michael with these other men with whom she was spending her evenings, Elizabeth had been conscious of how different he was. There was an air of breeding, an air of aristocracy about Michael. He was not handsome in the passionate way that Querita was, but he was just as handsome in his own quiet, well-bred, well-groomed way, and the knowledge that he belonged so indubitably to her, gave Elizabeth at times a sudden and unexpected little thrill.

Still, after all, she had amused herself. She had satisfied her sense of power by letting Gerald Briggs literally grovel at her feet, and she had also played with fire by encouraging Benito Querita.

But these were not the men whom she really wanted to be in her real life. As the wife of Michael Pannister, with the chance of his coming into a title (although it was a remote chance, still he was in direct succession to a distant kinsman, an old and a very ailing man who possessed also a very ailing son), she would reach that point in her social ambition on which she had set her heart.

She had been very angry with him, but much more angry with her mother, and she could not in the least understand why the Countess had made such a confession to Michael, except that perhaps she really was, as she protested, anxious to see Elizabeth well placed.

After Michael had left the night club, to the disgust of Gerald Briggs and his party, Miss Charlbury had suddenly declared that she was very tired and was going home. She refused to let anyone drive her home, but she borrowed Mr. Briggs' wonderful car, and she sat moodily in a corner of it asking herself a number of questions which could not possibly be answered.

When she had reached the house, she had let herself in with a latch-key, and she was going up the stairs to her room, when her mother had opened her door and spoken to her.

"Come in here a minute or two, Elizabeth," she said. "I am leaving very early to-morrow, before you will be up I am afraid, my dear, and I want to say something to you."

Just for an instant Elizabeth had hesitated, and then she had entered the bedroom. The Countess's maid had already packed her mistress's numerous possessions, the room had a bare look, yet it still had a gracious influence which pervaded every place where the Countess was.

"Please be brief," she said. "I am horribly tired and I have a bad headache."

Just for an instant the mother and the daughter sat and looked at one another. Then the Countess said very quietly:

"You must drop this man Querita out of your life, Elizabeth. He's a

snake, he is worthless, he is bad. He is only after money and he believes you will be useful to him."

Elizabeth laughed rather harshly: this remark stung her vanity very sharply.

"Oh, of course I know all about that," she said. "You are down on him, and that's quite understandable because you see you were ready to make a fool of yourself about him some little while ago."

Just for an instant a flush came into the pale cheeks of the beautiful woman facing her.

"You must not speak like that to me, Elizabeth," she said with quiet dignity. "You must not insult me. I tell you I have the strongest proof that this man Querita is bad. It is true he's had a little success on the screen, but he'll never keep it because he is not only the most conceited man that ever walked this earth, but he is without intelligence or education, and what is more, because he always makes enemies. He is not a fit companion for you, my child. Try once if you can, Elizabeth, to put all bitterness out of your thoughts where I am concerned. And believe I am most anxiously sincere to do everything in my power to help you to happiness."

"That's why you sent Michael Pannister to spy on me to-night, I suppose?" Elizabeth remarked in the same harsh way.

"I didn't know that he intended to find you to-night," her mother answered, and she spoke wearily. And then with a little touch of passion in her voice, she said: "Elizabeth, cling to Michael Pannister. He is sweet and good. He is chivalrous. If you put him out of your life, believe me, you will regret it, not once, but always."

"You must leave me to be the best judge of my actions," Elizabeth answered quietly. And then she drew her costly evening wrap about her shoulders. "Well, you are going away. I think that is a very wise arrangement, because it hasn't been too pleasant having you staying in this house with me."

Her mother came forward with outstretched hands.

"Don't leave me like that, Elizabeth. Perhaps—who knows?—we may never meet again. Put all bitterness out of your heart, child. Come to my arms just once, and give me a kiss."

But Elizabeth drew back. She looked very beautiful, almost regal as she stood there with her wonderful evening cloak drawn closely about her.

"You ask this a good many years too late," she said coldly. "I have no desire to go to your arms, or to give you a kiss. I am only too glad that you are going away to-morrow, and I must risk being considered very ill-bred and cruel if I say to you directly to your face I have not the slightest desire to see you again!"

After that she turned on her heel and went away up the next flight of stairs to her own room.

When she got there, she sat down. She knew perfectly well that the advice that she had just received was the best that could be given her, because as a matter of fact in her heart of hearts she was bitterly disappointed. She had expected to make a success for herself by her beauty, but though she had of course been acclaimed as a very lovely young woman, it seemed to her that the moment the world had known that Paulina Amati, or the Countess Ninetti, was staying with her, it went quite crazy about the celebrated actress, and Elizabeth had found herself being pushed very considerably into the background.

The words her mother had spoken about Querita lingered. But such was her disposition that though she knew they were the truth, it only needed this opposition to fan the flame of infatuation which had been gradually closing in upon her common sense and her reasoning power where this young South American man was concerned.

She told herself to-night that she would of course have to marry Michael; that would be the only thing she could do. But she was not going to be imprisoned after her marriage. She was not going to let Michael choose her friends for her. He would be her husband, but he was not going to be her master.

And so she sat pondering, and thinking, and smoking until the hours of the night stretched into the dawn, and it was almost morning before she went to bed.

Chapter XIX

THE commotion and little stir made in certain circles when Sophie Martingate's will had been made public was recorded once again when the contents of Lady Pannister's will were also given to the world. For she had done exactly what her sister had done: she had left the bulk of her money to Hester Slayde.

There were charities of course, and bequests to her servants, and a little legacy to Michael, but all the rest went to Hester.

Elizabeth was given this information by Michael himself when the young man came back from attending the funeral. He had written to her, and he had asked her to be in the house.

"I shall be travelling up from the country. I'm coming up by train; it's quicker."

She had annexed the sitting-room which her mother had arranged so charmingly, and she was sitting on the sofa playing on a ukulele when Michael was announced. She finished the little song she was singing (and she had a very sweet voice) before she put the instrument aside. And then she stretched out her hand to the young man.

"Well, and so at last you have come into your kingdom! Is it a very big kingdom, Michael?"

He bent and kissed her hand, and then he said:

"Gran has left me a thousand pounds."

Elizabeth sprang to her feet.

"A thousand pounds! Are you joking, Michael? Does this mean she had no money?"

The young man smiled faintly.

"She had far more money than I ever imagined she possessed, but she didn't leave it to me."

A cold feeling suddenly gripped Elizabeth's heart. The news he gave her was almost like a catastrophe, especially since she had resolved in her own mind that, however much it might bore her, she must marry Michael. She must cut herself adrift from the vulgarians and the doubtful people with whom she had been becoming so intimate of late.

And when he gave her the amazing news that Lady Pannister had left

all her money to Hester Slayde, then Elizabeth broke into a passion of anger. She flung the ukulele away from her until it smashed on the floor, and she flounced up and down the room. In this moment she revealed herself in her very worst possible light.

And as he looked at her and listened to her, the heart of Michael Pannister grew colder and colder within him.

Suddenly she confronted him.

"Well, of course this brings everything between us to an end," she said. "Did you know of this mad scheme? When you took that creature Hester down to the country, had you the slightest idea what your old grandmother was going to do?"

"How could I know?" said Michael in a low voice. "Gran never discussed her business with me." And then he said: "Why are you so angry with Hester? Do you suppose that Hester is made happy by this? Poor Hester! She suffered enough when Aunt Sophie left her her money, but this will be almost a deathblow to her."

Elizabeth laughed outright at this.

"You're such a softie! Well, this decides me at any rate. I shan't go on living with Hester! She will become insufferable. Already she has treated me badly. Leading me on to suppose she would settle a good deal of money on me, and then failing absolutely to do so."

Michael woke into life.

"But, my dear," he said, and he tried to take both her hands in his, "where will you go? What will you do? This is your home. Think of all the things she has done for you. If you leave her now, you really will break her heart, Elizabeth."

But Elizabeth took her hands away from his, and snapped her fingers.

"I care that much for Hester's heart. I'm fed up with the whole thing. I shall leave this house. I don't care what happens to me. I'm not going to stay here. Think of what everybody will be saying! They will laugh at me, and you. I must say your relatives have certainly made a fine fool of you! Well, it's good-bye, Michael. Please understand that there is nothing you can say to me that will induce me to change my mind. I shall get away from this place as quickly as possible. And if you have the slightest consideration for my feelings, before you leave here you will please inform Hester Slayde she is not to come near me. I won't answer for myself if she approaches me."

A very different interview awaited Michael after Elizabeth had flounced out of the room and gone to her bedroom.

As he descended the stairs, he sighed with a heavy sigh. He was informed by the butler that Miss Slayde would like to speak to him. He turned into the little sitting-room where Hester usually sat. She was not crying, nor did she seem flustered; in fact she smiled at him.

"Oh, my dear, if you could only have known what her ladyship told me. Yes, she did tell me, Mr. Michael, what she had got in her mind. I made so bold as to try to argue with her, but there, she was not one for arguing, not she. She'd made up her mind what she wanted to do, and all she wanted me for was to tell me what I had got to do that she wanted done. But I'm not going to tell you nothing more, only this, my dear."

Hester went up to the young man, and she put her arms round him, and she kissed him.

"I know now that you was very dear to the poor old woman, and so you

have got to be very dear to me. And you are not going to be proud and standoffish . . . you are going to let Hester do things for you."

Michael smiled, but very faintly, and he patted her shoulder as he answered :

"No, Hester, I can't let you do things for me. I believe that I read the lesson in this what Gran wanted me to be. Now I am absolutely forced to stand on my feet, and I don't mind telling you, dear old thing, that it's the best that could happen and the only way for a man to stand."

And then he spoke of Elizabeth, and he saw that Hester changed, and began to tremble.

"I suppose she's dreadfully angry, Mr. Michael ? "

"I think she is disappointed," the young man answered, "though God knows ! I have never led her to suppose there would be anything for me. I have not wanted to wait for Gran to die to get money. I'm going to leave London. Oh, I am not going very far," he added quickly. "Peter O'Malley wants me to take over some farm work in Ireland. He has a property out there, you know. It used to bring in a great deal of money, but it's poor now. But it's what he calls the grand life, that is, one is out in the open air riding to and fro, and being useful, I hope. What he wants me to do is to train a lot of polo ponies that he's been breeding. That's the kind of life I shall like. And you must promise me to look after my mother, and not let her fret."

As he was going, Hester Slayde caught him by the sleeve and pulled him back.

"Mr. Michael, does it mean as it's all over between you and Miss Elizabeth ? "

He laughed again a very sad little laugh.

"Why, Hester, I don't believe anything ever really existed. Of course I hoped, and I dreamed, but it was all foolishness."

After he had left her, Hester Slayde stood with her two hands clasped against her heart.

"Oh, my dear," she said to herself, "if only I could tell you what I promised her ladyship should be done ! "

. . . .

Try as she might, Jane Briggs could not get in touch with her brother. As a matter of fact she went herself in person to the flat which she understood he had been sharing with Benito Querita. She was informed there by a very obsequious Jap servant that neither of his gentlemen were in London ; in fact, he volunteeered the information that he believed Mr. Briggs was at that moment in Paris.

So Jane went back to the big house, and she resolved to stay there for a day or two.

The news of what old Lady Pannister had done with her money troubled Jane Briggs very considerably. She was so sorry for Michael. At the same time her heart gave a leap because she felt perfectly convinced that this unexpected blow would give him freedom—freedom from a most selfish and cruel nature, freedom to make something of his life unhampered by such a woman as Elizabeth Charlbury.

She just scribbled him a few kind words saying that she would very much like to see him before he went to Ireland, if it was to Ireland he was going.

He answered this note in person just as she was sitting very dismally in the big empty library asking herself over and over again the same question : What was she going to do about her brother ?

" I'm not going to Ireland," he said as they clasped hands, and he held hers very tightly in his. " Through Sir Henry Winscott I have had an offer of a very good berth in the City. You see, I am fairly good at languages. It is about the only qualification I possess, and my grandfather's people were very big commercial folk, and because of these two facts I have been offered, as I have just said, a very decent post in a very well-established firm."

" I am glad," said Jane Briggs. " I am sure you will make good, and if you will only settle your mind to it, you will find business and work are simply magnificent things."

And then Jane, with a little rush of colour in her cheeks, put a question to him.

" And your marriage, when is that going to be ? "

Michael laughed slightly.

" Oh, I'm not going to be married. That's all off. Elizabeth did not want me ; it was the money she wanted." He sat down, and then he said : " All the same, Jane, I am awfully worried about her. She has gone away . . . she has left poor Hester, who is nearly out of her mind about Elizabeth. We don't even know where she is."

" Oh, she'll fall on her feet," said Jane Briggs dryly. " Don't fret, my dear ; whoever else suffers, Elizabeth Charlbury will always be all right ! Yes, I know that sounds a bit catty, but that's just how I am feeling. The fact is, I'm fed up with town ! I loathe being here, and yet I must stay. I must get in touch with Jerry somehow. And then I'm worried about Judith Winscott. You know she is going off abroad with her father ? "

Michael looked at her in surprise.

" No, I didn't know that. The fact is I haven't been to the Winscotts for some little time. I think I had better go there at once. Going abroad ? For a long time ? "

" Yes. Sir Henry has resolved to take a good rest. I think he is doing this because he has noticed that his girl has not looked at all well just recently. They are going first of all to Switzerland and then on to Italy. I shall miss her ; I'm awfully fond of Judith Winscott. I am sorry you don't see more of her. She told me when I first knew her that you were great friends."

Michael nodded his head.

" Yes, so we were." Then he shrugged his shoulders. " Well, life brings its changes, you know."

He did not look at Jane as he said this, and the thought that passed through both their minds was that it was Elizabeth who had come between him and that old friendship, but they neither of them spoke what was in their minds. They talked instead on many things, and Jane promised to go to see poor Hester.

" She's just fretting herself to a shadow," said Michael Pannister. " She is such a dear good soul. I cannot understand why she should have been used in this way by both these old women. She is far too sweet and good to be made the sport of their peculiar tempers."

And then he got up and said :

" I must go and find Judith. I must see her. I can't let her go abroad without seeing her. And are you going to stay in London ? "

"Well, I shall stay here to-night," said Jane. "I have sent telegrams in every direction, and although the manservant at that flat said that Jerry had gone to Paris, I don't believe it. You see, we must come together. He wants to take out a very considerable amount of his capital and he can't do that without my consent. Well, I don't mean to give my consent unless I know what he is going to do with this money, and Jerry knows that perfectly well."

"Well, if you are in town," said Michael, "ring me up and let me know. I shall be in the City, but I could come to see you in the afternoon when I leave my work. And listen!" he said, as he held her hand once more and pressed it between both of his: "If by any chance, Jane, you come across any news of Elizabeth, will you let me know? I can't help worrying about her. After all, you know, she is not very old."

"Righto," said Jane. "I may be able to find out something about her. If I do, you shall certainly know."

She perched herself on the big table in the middle of the library after he had gone, and sat swinging her feet to and fro for a while, and as she did so, the door opened suddenly and her brother appeared.

He came up to her with a sort of swagger, and kissed her.

"Well, I hear you have been sending the town crier round London after me! What *do* you want, Jane?"

"What do I want?" said Jane Briggs, slipping to her feet. She noticed that he looked very excited, and his eyes were very bright, but she also noticed that he was much better dressed than he had been, and had at least an attempt at a smart appearance. "Why, you can answer that, Jerry, better than I can. You've been approaching the trustees to take out a very considerable amount of capital, and you know you can't do that unless you get my consent."

His face took on a peevish and an ugly expression.

"I know that's what was fixed, and a rotten business it is. As if a chap couldn't do what he wanted with his own money without dragging his sister into it! But there are——"

"Well, you seem to have been doing a good deal without any interference from me," Jane interrupted him. "But it's no use grousing! We can't go against the will, and that's that. So you have got to tell me what you want this money for. I hope," said the girl suddenly, looking at him with a bleak expression in her voice—"I hope, Jerry, you haven't got into any serious trouble?"

"Don't be an ass, Jane!" the young man replied rudely. "Of course I've got to tell you what I want it for, but it's a ridiculous business all the same."

He had lit a cigarette, and it was hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He walked to one of the windows, and then he came back again.

"Well, here you have it in a nutshell. I'm going to be married. I want this money to settle on my wife."

Jane looked at him: some tears gathered in her eyes. He was so young. She had a longing to wrap her arms about him and protect him.

"Why, of course, if you are going to be married . . . but——"

"But don't begin to preach, Jane," said young Briggs hotly. "Yes, I'm going to be married right away. I am going to marry the woman I love, and that ought to be good enough for you."

"You are going to marry Elizabeth Charlbury, aren't you?" queried his sister, not very steadily.

He took the cigarette from his mouth, and threw it across the table.

"Well, what if I am? What have you got to say against that? It's true I've got money, Jane, but I'm not every woman's choice. There's a lot of things against me. Oh, I'm not a fool! I know I'm not a patch on any of the men that have hung round Elizabeth! But after all, she has chosen me, and that ought to be good enough for you."

Jane answered him quietly.

"Well, it isn't. I don't know why she has promised to marry you, Jerry, but I can make a pretty good guess. You know she was engaged only the other day to Michael Pannister?"

Her brother's face flushed crimson, and his expression was not pleasant.

"That's a lie. She never was engaged to Pannister—a puny, stuck-up pup like that! Why, he was only hanging on round about her. And what could he do for her? A nice sort of chap to ask a girl like Elizabeth to be his wife! Why, even his old grandmother has cut him out."

"Yes," said Jane Briggs quietly, "and that's why Elizabeth is marrying you, my dear."

Her brother looked at her, and came almost menacingly near her.

"Damn you!" he said thickly. "You always do your best to put poison into my heart."

"Jerry, be sensible," said Jane quickly. "Try for once to see things in a practical and a reasonable way. Why *should* Elizabeth Charlbury marry you? Do you think she would touch you with the end of a barge pole if you hadn't got this money? God! I wish I could put some of my strength and my understanding into you! My dear brother, marry this woman and she will break your heart!"

"I'll take the risk," young Briggs answered his sister, and he spoke now in a very quiet, cold voice. "And I've got to tell you something, Jane, something that will take the wind out of your sails. Perhaps you don't know that I *can* get out of the arrangement made by our father! I *can* draw out the capital if I want to, without reference to you—if it's in connection with marriage. That I've discovered for myself: not from our beautiful dud set of lawyers and trustees, but from another firm altogether. Marriage is a different matter. A man can marry without asking his sister's consent. And I'm going to marry, and I'm going to settle this money on Elizabeth Charlbury! So you can swallow that whole and be pleasant about it, or you can make yourself a damned nuisance. I don't care which it is. Only it won't make any difference to me."

Jane drew a deep breath.

"If you're telling me the truth and you can touch this money without my consent—well, I suppose I can't do anything. But I tell you plainly, Jerry, you are a big fool, and you are building up great unhappiness for yourself, my dear."

"Oh," said Gerald Briggs in the same quiet way, "so that's how you feel? Righto. Well, I shan't bother you any more . . . you've seen the last of me. Good-bye."

He turned as he spoke, and almost ran out of the room.

And after she had paused an instant or two, Jane Briggs went after him quickly. But she was not in time to catch him. She heard the front door bang, and the next moment she heard the sound of a motor starting, and then

she realized that she had put an enormous barrier between herself and the boy who had been so dear to her father, and who was, despite all his follies, so dear to herself.

After she was back in the library, she rang up the trustees, and she discovered that what her brother had said was right. For any sort of speculation or investment, or to use the money commercially, Gerald could not have drawn out any of his share of the capital without her consent, but when it was a question of a marriage settlement that was a different matter altogether, and she could do nothing to stop him.

As a matter of fact, they informed her that he had already taken the first steps to obtain command of the capital he required, and he had instructed them to draw up a deed of settlement on Miss Elizabeth Charlbury, who was going to marry him as soon as possible.

When Jane inquired, as she did in a quiet way, whether it would be possible to safeguard all this money, she was informed that Mr. Briggs had particularly desired that the money should be given to Miss Charlbury in the form of a deed of gift, and that she could do what she liked with the money absolutely.

As she put down the receiver, and turned away, Jane said to herself: " So that's that."

And then she sat down by the big table and buried her face in her arms.

Chapter XX

DESPITE the fact that she felt that her brother had asserted his independence, and that she would only come up against great difficulty if she tried to interfere in his arrangements, Jane could not bring herself to go back to the country, nor could she bring herself to meet Michael Pannister.

In fact, she denied herself to the young man when he called twice, because she really felt she could not meet him realizing what this marriage between her brother and Elizabeth Charlbury would signify to Pannister.

And there was no one in whom Jane could confide, unless she turned to Michael's mother, and that somehow she felt she could not do. What she did do, however, was to go to see Hester Slayde.

And she spent a very pleasant hour with Hester having tea in that modest little sitting-room in the very big smart house. And she found Hester in a very calm and almost cheerful mood. Evdidently something was hidden in the heart of this working woman which gave her a sense of happiness.

Elizabeth was not mentioned between them, but Hester informed Miss Briggs that she had put the house into the hands of the agents and hoped to let it immediately. And then she said she did not know exactly what she was going to do, but that she intended to stay in a little cottage somewhere in the country.

" You won't live in that old house in Kent ? " queried Jane.

Hester shook her head with a faint smile.

" Oh no, my dear, I am not fit for that sort of thing. I just want a little place of my own, and I am grateful to my old mistress, Miss Martingate, that I am able to do this."

" Well, you've got to come somewhere near me, Hester. And you know

my cottage is not far from that old house in Kent. You come and stay with me a day or two," said Jane, "and we'll drive about and see if we can't find you a place you will like. I must tell you that your dear Mr. Michael just loves my cottage."

"Ah, my dear," said Hester, "I know that right well. He has told me a lot about it. It's like him, for Mr. Michael he's that simple in a sense. He takes after his mother: he don't want no grand things." And then the tears came into Hester's eyes. "And my dear," she said, "he's just turning round and he's doing the best he can for himself. And I can't help thinking as these two dead old women are just as happy as they can be now because he's found his feet and he's going to make good. And when the time comes that he has to be put in a different position, why he'll be all ready for it, my dear. You see if he isn't!"

After she had left Hester, and was walking slowly back to the street in which her own great house was situated, the thought came to Jane whether it would not be possible for her to come in contact with Elizabeth.

"If she wants the money, let her have the money," she said to herself, "but I don't want her to hurt Jerry."

And that was what was clinging to Jane's mind. She knew that Elizabeth could not fail but be cruel to her brother. And this brother was so dear to her: dearer still because he had taken himself right away from her and had defied her.

She did not know exactly where to find Miss Charlbury, and she was quite convinced that Hester could give her no information. But she thought the best thing she could do would be to write a letter addressed to Elizabeth, and send it to that flat where she believed that her brother was still to be found.

It was very dreary in that big house, and Jane hated having to dine there alone with so much ceremony. Her heart turned eagerly to the thought of the country, and yet she could not bring herself to leave London. She must make one determined and last effort to stand between her brother and what she knew was going to be a dreadful mistake.

She was dressing for dinner (her lonely and oppressive dinner!) when a message was brought up to her room to say that Mr. Michael Pannister had called, and wanted most particularly to see Miss Briggs.

"He says it's most important, miss," her maid added.

Jane hesitated just a little while, and then gave a shrug of her shoulders. It was a lovely evening; there was a touch of the coming summer in the air that came in through her window.

She had put on an old white dress, one which had been a great favourite with her father. Old Mr. Briggs had always disliked heavy mourning, and though it hurt Jane to wear colours, yet she clung to the thought of doing everything she could that would have given her dear father pleasure or satisfaction. Therefore she frequently wore white.

And she looked extremely young, and pretty, and girlish as she went running down the stairs to the library where she knew she would find her guest.

Michael was standing by the window, and he turned round quickly as he heard the door open. She looked so sweet and so lovable as she stood there that his heart contracted. But he came forward with both hands outstretched.

"I had to come, Jane," he said. "I had to know how you were."

She let her two hands rest in his, and she smiled at him: the touch of his hands sent a thrill through her.

"Why, my dear, I'm all right. Did you imagine I was ill?"

"I didn't know," Michael answered in a low voice. "I didn't know."

With her quick perception and her shrewd reasoning mind, Jane saw at once that something had happened and that the reason he had come to her was because he wanted to be with her in what possibly would be a very dark hour.

"Something wrong, isn't there?" she said. "Speak out plainly, Michael. You know I'm not a coward. Is it Jerry? Has there been an accident?"

"It concerns your brother, Jane," Michael Pannister said. He released both her hands and took one of them and slipped it through his arm. "But as far as I know he's all right up to the present."

The girl looked at him. She saw that he was wondering how he could break certain news to her.

"Now go right ahead, Michael," she said. "Don't be afraid. . . . Tell me . . . what is it? As long as Jerry isn't hurt and there hasn't been an accident, I can stand anything."

"You haven't seen the evening papers yet?" queried Michael.

And as she shook her head, he drew from his pocket a folded-up edition of a newspaper. As he opened it, he pointed to some words in big letters heading a short article. The words were:

SOCIETY ROMANCE. SUDDEN MARRIAGE OF MISS ELIZABETH CHARLBURY TO BENITO QUERITA, THE WELL-KNOWN FILM STAR.

Then the article went on to say that society had been astonished, and interested, and excited over the news that the night before Miss Charlbury, whose beauty had made such a sensation in London, had gone abroad with Mr. Querita, and that the news had been sent to the papers that she had been married at a registry-office in London before leaving for the Continent.

Jane Briggs grew as cold as ice, and almost as white.

And Michael held her tightly by the hand.

"Now, Jane, you are not going to take this very badly."

But she made no reply at once, and then she said in a broken voice:

"Michael, I've *got* to find Jerry! . . . I *must* have Jerry with me! My God! this will kill him! Oh, my brother! my dear brother! How cruel this woman has been! . . . how cruel! What a fiend! And to you too, my dear."

"Don't think about me, Jane," said Michael Pannister simply. "I was taught my lesson very considerably and very thoroughly the last time I was with Elizabeth. She left me no illusion, and, after all, a man cannot love without some illusion. My dear, don't upset yourself. Look here, I came to you because I knew your first thought would be for your brother. We must find him. Where do you think he could be?"

"I don't know . . . I don't know," said Jane. She let him put her into a chair, and as she sat down, she covered her face with her hands. "Oh Michael, I am learning such ugly things about life! I never could have imagined that a woman could do what this woman has done. It's too shocking, it's almost unbelievable. Do you know——" She dropped her hands and she looked up at Michael Pannister: the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Do you know Jerry has settled fifty thousand pounds on her?

It's hers to do what she likes with. I feared something like this, and yet I didn't think it possible she could be so base, so terrible!"

"Did you agree that he should give her this money?" queried young Pannister eagerly.

She shook her head.

"No, but it appears that there was a clause in the will by which I was powerless to intervene. If he wanted to draw on the capital for a marriage settlement, he was at perfect liberty to do this. That's what he did. And he did not make it in the form of a settlement; he made it over to her as a gift. And all the time you see she meant to give it to this other man. But what does the money signify? You know what I think about money. It's my brother I'm thinking about. Oh, my dear, my dear, I must find Jerry. My heart is cold within me . . . what is happening to him?"

Then she brushed away the tears from her eyes, and sat forward.

"Michael," she said, "Jerry has been a fool, and Jerry has proved himself unworthy to have come into such a fortune as my father left him, but Jerry's got a sense of honour, and his honour will have been touched to the raw by this business. I'm so afraid! I mean afraid that he will follow these two. Yes! that's what I'm afraid of. Because you see he loved her in his foolish way. He wouldn't hear a word against her. I tried to warn him . . . poor Jerry! Oh! I *must* find him! . . . I must find him!"

"I'll help you," said Michael. "We can get at something of the truth, I am sure. Let me ring through to that flat where he was staying. There may be some means of knowing where to find him there."

"I'll do that," said Jane.

She went to the telephone and rang up the number of the flat. But though she rang again and again, the operator always declared that there was no answer, so she put down the receiver and came back again.

"He's not there," she said, "and the flat is apparently empty. What shall we do now?"

This query was answered in the strangest way possible by the butler announcing that there was a lady to see Miss Briggs, a lady whose name was Miss Slayde.

"Hester!" exclaimed Michael.

He moved to go to the door, but Jane stepped forward quickly.

"Ask Miss Slayde to come in at once."

Hester came in. She was pale as death, and shaking in every limb.

"Oh, my dear," she said. "I have come for you, Miss Jane. I have got bad news for you. I want you, my dear . . . I want you, my dear. Oh, Mr. Michael, I'm glad to see you here. Oh, Mr. Michael, something dreadful has happened."

The two young people went up to Hester, each one slipped a hand through her arm and they led her to a chair. Then Jane kissed her.

"Now, dear," she said, "take a pull at yourself. You've had a shock. What is it? Tell me, is it something to do with my brother?"

Hester tried to speak, but she could not do so, and nodded her head. And then for a little they let her rest calmly while they fussed about her and caressed her two cold hands. And then little by little she managed to stammer out something of what was on her heart.

"I went out to-day, my dear," she said. "I went up to my poor mistress's grave. You see it was her birthday and I wanted to put some flowers on her grave. And I was gone quite a long time, and then when I came back, I

was told by the woman who was working for me—you see I've sent away all the servants because the house is let and I'm leaving very shortly. Well I was told by this woman as there was a young man waiting to see me. It seems he'd come to the house twice already, and had gone away, but now he was back again, and he was just walking up and down in a wild sort of way. Well, my dear . . . Yes, Mr. Michael, I'll have a glass of water, please."

As they were alone, she turned to Jane, and then she said :

" I thought at first as it would be Mr. Michael, you know, because I had a very cruel letter from Miss Elizabeth this morning, saying as she had done with the whole lot of us. And she wished me joy of all the money I had managed to get hold of. Oh, it was a right-down cruel letter, Miss Jane, that it were."

" Yes, but this young man," said Jane eagerly. " You knew him ? "

" Well, miss, I did sort of know him because he had come pretty often to the house to fetch Miss Elizabeth in his car. It was your brother."

" My brother ! " said Jane. " And where is he ? Is he with you now ? "

" Oh, my dear, I can't make head or tail of it. But he held out a pencilled letter from Miss Elizabeth telling him that he was to come to the house and wait, and that he was not to leave until she sent him word. Well, miss, when I told him as I didn't know where she was, or what Miss Elizabeth meant, or why she had written to him in this way, he just began to go queer like. He frightened me, Miss Jane—yes, he frightened me ! And he talked at a great rate, and he said an awful lot of things about Miss Elizabeth. And he seemed to be full of excitement, and I couldn't make head or tail of what he wanted. And I got scared, miss. And so then I thought that the best thing I could do, as she didn't make no mention in her note as to what she was going to do, would be to show him the letter I had received. And when he read it, he just stood like a stone image. Oh, thank you, Mr. Michael," as the young man held a glass of water to her lips.

" Yes, Hester, please go on," said Jane Briggs nervously.

" Well, he stood there, as I say, looking like a stone statue . . . and he gave a great cry, and then he said, ' Oh my God ! she's gone ! . . . she's tricked me.' And then he swore at her ! Oh, he said dreadful things, and he called her dreadful names. And he just went walking to and fro like a mad creature, and I didn't know what to do. And then all at once, miss, he took a little bottle out of his pocket, and if you believe me, before I could stop him he had put it to his lips and he took it. And then, my dear, he gave a big groan and a sort of scream and he fell down right at my feet on the carpet . . . and I knew he had taken poison."

" Poison ! " said Jane, " and is he dead ? "

Her voice was unnaturally quiet.

Hester shook her head.

" No, miss . . . no, miss. God be thanked ! You see the moment he took it, I called out to the woman to go to the doctor as lives next door practically, and she was to tell him as something dreadful had happened ! Well, miss, the doctor he come, and he made your brother very sick . . . and he just saved his life. That he did ! And now he's lying on the bed like a dead thing . . . as weak as a rat, and so I just come along to you. And please will you come back with me ? It's all too much for me . . . it's all too much for me."

" My poor Hester ! " said Jane gently. " You stay here with Mr. Michael

and get a little calmer, and I'll just run upstairs and put on my hat and coat, and then we'll all three come back to your house. I am so sorry that you should have had to go through this. It's very, very unfair on you. I only pray God that what you tell me is true, and that my dear brother . . . my dear brother's life has been saved. Take care of her, Michael," said Jane.

To the butler, she said as she came out of the library :

" Tell the cook I shall not be here for dinner. I have had bad news ; my brother is very ill."

The butler was a servant who had been with her father, and he understood. He, too, had seen the evening paper. He made no comment, but he offered his services.

" Can't I come along, too ? There might be something as I can do."

" You can come, yes, because someone will have to relieve Miss Slayde of all trouble. I hope I shall be able to move my brother from her house here, but he is very ill at the moment."

Chapter XXI

It took some little time for the gossip and excitement over the elopement of Elizabeth Charlbury and Benito Querita to die down, but eventually it became a stale subject.

But there were a good many people who took the trouble to know how things were going with Gerald Briggs. The announcement of his serious illness surprised none of those who knew how crazily in love, indeed how infatuated he was with the beautiful Miss Charlbury.

But the real cause of his illness was kept out of the papers. No one knew that he had practically tried to put an end to himself, and that if he had not been speedily taken in hand, he certainly would have died. He had been conveyed back from the house (which Hester was giving up) to the big mansion which belonged to himself and his sister, and there he was put in the room which his father had occupied, and nurses were installed.

And Jane felt a transitory touch of happiness in having her brother so near to her, and realizing that in his weak state he had drifted back to something like his old affection for her. Many people wanted to know what had happened to the Queritas. The idea was that they had gone to Spain, but after a while paragraphs began to appear to the effect that the big new American film, a part of which was to be screened in Italy, was going to start amost at once, and that the part of the film hero would be taken by Benito Querita.

There were some of the men and women with whom Elizabeth had mingled (though she despised them), who gave her real sympathy.

" She'll find out for herself what a mistake she has made," some of these people would say one to the other.

And then they would add :

" Of course little Briggs was a bounder and an outsider, but least he'd got a heart somewhere ! And that's what our dear Benito lacks altogether."

Even with such people as these, and they were, as Michael Pannister had said to Jane Briggs on one occasion, " a poor lot," there was a feeling of contempt for the woman who had tricked Gerald Briggs into giving her a

very large sum of money; only to lavish this sum of money on the young man whom she had married. It was declared to be a low-down business.

And more than one person was sorry for young Briggs. After all he had been a very generous fool! There are plenty of fools in the world, but very few as generous as he had been.

It touched Jane to know that there were people who cared sufficiently about her brother to call at the house, and leave gifts of flowers, and to show some evidence of thought and consideration, and she always tried to rouse her brother by telling him of the kind messages.

But the part that hurt Jane so much in connection with Jerry was that he lay so still and quiet in his bed, that though he had turned the corner and was gradually getting a little strength, all spirit had gone out of him, and he looked like a man who had been struck a blow from which he would never recover.

It was to Hester Slayde that Jane opened her heart. She felt she could not do it to Michael, or to his mother.

"Oh, I can't forgive her! I can't forgive her. You know, Hester, it's not the money, it's the mean way in which she treated Jerry. She has a big load on her conscience. Just fancy that poor boy going about with poison in his pocket"—Jane's voice broke here—" that's what she did to him! She made him mad, and the most cruel thing of all was the way she let him believe in her, and even plan to go away with her . . . and all the time her mind was settled on going with this other man!"

And each time that Hester heard these bitter words she always said: "Poor Miss Elizabeth, I am sorry for her."

Once Jane Briggs turned on her rather hotly.

"Sorry for her! Why should you be sorry for her? She had it in her own hands to be a happy woman, to be an honourable woman, to be a decent woman, and she threw this all away! And yet you are sorry for her, Hester!"

"My dear, I am sorry for her," said Hester in her simple way, "just because Miss Elizabeth took such a wrong view of life! The Countess, she used to talk to me over and over again about her, and she always found excuses for Miss Elizabeth. She said, you know, that it was so cruel for a little girl to be left quite alone in the start of her life. Because although of course Miss Charlbury had her father that was not the same thing as having a mother. And then again she met such a lot of queer people, and she was brought up in such a strange way. We've just got to be a little bit sorry for her! . . . Just a little sorry."

"Well, I'm afraid I am not a bit sorry," said Jane Briggs hurriedly. "When I see my brother and see him lying there with that strange, pathetic expression in his eyes, when I see how thin he is, how weak he is, how white he is, I could . . . Honestly I don't know what I could not do to her, Hester!"

"Well, I'm sorry for her, Miss Jane," Hester always answered. "I'm very sorry, and I'm thinking we'd ought to pity her. I'm thinking she'll want our pity. You see, Miss Jane, the Countess she knew all about that Mr. Querita. And from what she told me I'm afeared he was a bad lot! It seems like as he was in her company acting with her, and he proved himself very worthless. And I do know, my dear, as the Countess she tried her best, that she did, to stand between Miss Elizabeth and this man. But it wasn't no good. Miss Charlbury wasn't easy to persuade like; she'd got her own

views, she had, and she'd go her own way. Poor lass! I'm afraid she'll find out what a bad way it was only too soon."

Except for her brother's delicacy, and the change that was in him (and somehow or other Gerald Briggs showed not the slightest inclination to take any interest in life, or to be eager to leave his sick-room, and to go out in the world again), Jane would have been almost happy in these days. There was so much sweetness about her.

Marcella O'Malley went almost daily to see her, and when she did not come, then Jane would go to her studio.

And as for Michael, there was nothing he did not do to prove his friendship. He was working quite closely in the City and doing unusually well it seemed, showing in fact an aptitude for work which had not been expected by anyone. And Jane rejoiced over this, as also did Hester.

And so the days slipped by, and summer came, and still Gerald Briggs gave no sign, expressed not the slightest desire to leave that big room, or throw aside his rôle of an invalid. And Jane's anxiety about him deepened, and grew sharper.

"What *am* I going to do with him, Michael?" she asked young Pannister more than once.

A little while before it had been, "What am I going to do to stand between Jerry and the world?" Now it was what could she do to bring Jerry back into the world, to reinstate him in his own opinion, to take from him the legacy of humiliation and injured dignity which Elizabeth had left him, and to put him on his feet again.

"Don't hurry," Michael always said. "He's gone through a very bad time, remember. It's not only his bodily weakness, he had a terrible shock, Jane my dear, and so we *must* give him time!"

Frankly Michael confessed to himself that the attitude young Briggs took was a surprise, and in a sense it stirred a feeling of admiration. There was something now almost dignified about Gerald Briggs. Just as his illness had taken from him the look of dissipation which had become so definite, so his spirit seemed to have been cleansed and his nature put into a different groove.

As a matter of fact, the two young men found themselves drifting almost imperceptibly into a kind of friendship. For some time the invalid had refused to see Michael Pannister, or to show the slightest interest in his coming and going.

But little by little, to Jane's great delight, Michael had been welcomed to the sick-room, and had sat and talked to her brother.

And one very hot evening as she went in to his room after she had come back from a visit to her cottage, Gerald astonished his sister by beginning to speak about Michael Pannister.

"I never cared for him. I thought he was a prig and a stuck-up swell!" he said, "but I find I made a mistake. What a lot of mistakes I've made, haven't I, Jane?"

"My dearest, I don't think you've made any more than anybody else," Jane answered. "Heaven knows, I'm always making mistakes! You know that young man I took on as an under-gardener? Well!"

She launched out on a long story which had been given to her at the cottage. She did this to interest Gerald, and to take his mind off himself.

He listened with some interest, and then he said:

"You know, Pannister seems to be quite happy doing the work he's doing now. I wish I'd got some work, Jane! Isn't there something I could do?

Isn't there some post in our business I could fill? Of course I don't want to give any chap of ours the push, but perhaps they could make a post for me just to show me what an incompetent nincompoop I am."

Jane's heart gave a great bound.

"Why, Jerry," she said, "I think that's a splendid idea. Look here, we'll have old Singleton up, and you can talk things out with him. You may have some ideas, my boy," she said. "Of course the business is as flourishing as ever, and we are carrying on just as we did when father was alive, but even a business like ours is capable of fresh ideas."

"Well, I don't know that I've got any ideas," said Gerald. "It isn't exactly my strong point—ideas, I mean. But still, I would like to talk to old Singleton. I've got to do something," he added restlessly, "and I don't want to go back to the old life. I see now what a rotten business it was. And I don't want to go on chucking away my money in the ways I have done. It took father a good many years to build up our fortune; I've got to remember that, haven't I? God!" said the boy suddenly, "how low I fell, didn't I?"

"And how high you have climbed, my dear," said Jane gently, and leaning forward she kissed him. "I am so proud of you, Jerry," she said; "I really can't find words to tell you what I think of you."

He kissed her in a shy sort of way, and then he said a little awkwardly: "Well, that's all right. I've been thinking, Jane," he went on after a little pause, "perhaps I could go abroad in connection with the business? Anyway, I'll have a talk with Singleton, and then we'll see what we shall see."

. . . .

The Countess Ninetti had sailed for America carrying with her an immense quantity of new and wonderful clothes, and she was half-way to New York when the news was flashed on the wireless that her daughter had eloped with Querita.

Though in a sense prepared for some such folly on Elizabeth's part, the fact that the girl had made such a dreadful mistake was a crushing blow.

Her maid was greatly distressed about her because the Countess seemed to be so ill, so broken on that voyage to the States. When at last she reached New York she looked very fragile, but very lovely. She had written a few words to Michael Pannister, and she had these posted the moment she arrived.

And she had also written to Hester.

Fortunately in a sense she was full of business, rehearsals started at once, and in her work she tried to lose the remorse, and the regret, and unhappiness which the knowledge of Elizabeth's suicidal act had brought to her. When answers came to her letter Michael wrote most tenderly, and Hester in her queer writing gave her the full account of all that had happened—telling of the episode of young Briggs, how he had settled such a big sum of money on Elizabeth, and how he had tried to take his life when her faithlessness and cruelty had been brought home to him.

The Countess cabled and wrote, and in every possible way she showed sympathy, regret and unhappiness. As a matter of fact her devoted friend, Franklin Oppenshaw, was greatly distressed about her, and tried very hard to induce her to postpone the opening of her theatrical season.

But she told him truthfully that work was the one salvation for her, and

then she let him know all that had been burdening her heart ever since she had left England. It was the fact that Elizabeth had done such a dishonest and dishonourable thing in taking money from young Briggs to bestow it on Querita which had struck the worst of the blows on her mother.

"We *must* do something about that, Franklin," she said to her friend, when she had opened her heart to him, and poured out all that was troubling her. "I can't let this boy be robbed in this way!"

"Now see here, honey," the man said gently, "you don't suppose you will do any good if you rob yourself by giving back this big sum of money to this poor boob, do you? You'd best save your money, my child," he said. "You may be wanting it much sooner perhaps than you expect."

"If only I could see Elizabeth," was the answer. "Oh, my dear Franklin, though I knew that she was bitter, and was cruel, and hard, somehow I *did* think there would be some spark of her father in her. But she has taken every hope of that away from me. It's no use telling me it's not my business. I can't help feeling it *is* my business to do something where young Briggs is concerned."

"Well, I guess," said Oppenshaw slowly, "you would not be doing any good to yourself, or to him, or to anybody else, if you were to call in all your money and try to pay him back. See here now, Paulina! I kept silent; you know my way—I'm not a talker—but I heard a pretty good bit when I was in London, and it strikes me that you might give back your money twice over to this boy, and you would not heal the wound in his heart: no, not one little bit, my honey! It was a nasty low-down trick to do, but when a woman's got madness in her veins (and it must be madness that made your Elizabeth go off with this Querita chap), why, there's no arguing, you know."

"I wish I knew where she was," said the Countess brokenly. "I'm a great fool, Franklin, of course; but after all she is my child, and Querita is a snake, and a brute, and I'm frightened what will fall to her."

"Well, she's made her bed, and she's got to lie on it," said Mr. Oppenshaw quietly, "and you're just making yourself as ill as you can be for no good at all. You must think of yourself, Paulina. You've got all this work in front of you, and the excitement of your opening. I wish I could fly right away with you and take you out of all these things that are worrying you!"

"Stand by me, friend," said the Countess, and she stretched out her hand to him. "I need you. I never have needed anyone as much as I need you. And you must bear with me, Franklin, because this has gone very deeply into my heart, and you are the only person to whom I can speak openly."

Chapter XXII

It was in September that Gerald Briggs went abroad once more. This time he did not go with his car and chauffeur: he went as a worker, and a traveller.

His interview with the various heads of the old firm had resulted in his taking on a job which did not clash with any of those already occupied, but which was considered a very important one, and which he resolved to fill to the very best of his power. He had to go out to see some property which

belonged to the firm, and this would take him into different parts of the East.

The mere fact that he had something to do acted like magic on the young man. And when Jane went down to Southampton and saw him on board the boat which was taking him out to China, she had the satisfaction of seeing him as she had never expected to see Jerry. He was so alert, so full of self-control and business ways. And just when they parted he put his arms about her, and he kissed her tenderly.

"I'm going to make good, Jane," he said. "You are going to be proud of me, really. I'm going to show you I've got some stuff in me, after all."

There was much for Jane to do all through that autumn and winter. She did not go back to live definitely at the cottage. She had turned to Michael's mother, and had asked her to help her to plan out her life so that she was able to do some good to her fellow-creatures.

And so it fell about naturally that as Marcella O'Malley developed a great deal of delicacy that winter, and was the cause of great anxiety to her son, and to her husband, Jane constituted herself the companion, and, in a sense, the nurse of this charming woman. And with Hester to help her they did everything in their power to relieve Michael of anxiety.

It was in fact with Jane and Hester in attendance that Mrs. O'Malley was taken South that Christmas. It was considered necessary for her to get out of England for the early months of the year, and Jane at once jumped at the idea of going abroad with the woman who was so sweet, and the mother who was so beloved by Michael.

There were two reasons why Jane wanted to go away from England. One was because she loved to be able to do anything she could for Michael's mother. The other was because Judith Winscott had come back to London her old brisk self, and the friendship between Sir Henry's girl and Michael had started anew.

Michael, himself, would have liked to go abroad with his mother. But he was so keen to keep on in the City, and was really showing such marked capacity for the work he had to do, that there was no possibility of his getting away.

But Jane promised him that if by any chance his mother seemed to fret for him, she would send for him.

"You know you can trust me. And Mr. O'Malley has every confidence in me too. Oh, Michael," the girl said, and she kept back the tears with an effort, "you don't know what it means to me to be able to fuss about your mother! And to have someone like her that I am allowed to do things for! Now that I'm not worrying any more about Jerry, you see I have got to fret and fuss about somebody, and your mother has come just at the right moment! Did I tell you I had a few lines from him the other day? He's in New York, and he's made great friends with that beautiful creature whom you call the Countess. He tells me that she found out that he was in New York, and that she sent for him. He's fallen in love with her: he says she is the sweetest woman he's ever known."

And then Jane checked a sigh.

"I know he's doing wonderfully well, and I'm frightfully pleased and proud that he is doing so well, but I fret about him just a little bit all the same. I wonder, will he ever get over what happened last year?"

"I hope he will, my dear," Michael said to her. "Somehow I think he will. He has shown that he's got grit, and that's everything."

As a matter of fact to Jane's great delight she had an unexpected visit

from her brother when she was in the south of France. He crossed on a French boat from America, and knowing where she was to be found, he made his way down to Cannes, and suddenly appeared one day at the hotel where she and Mrs. O'Malley and Hester were staying.

It was a very happy meeting. Jane scarcely knew her brother: he seemed to have grown. He certainly had put on weight, although he was very spare and active, and still very youthful looking. But he was full of his travels, and did nothing but talk enthusiastically about the Countess Ninetti and all the charming attention which she had shown him.

"I believe that this is going to be her last theatrical engagement," he said. "And I also believe she is going to be married to an American man who has adored her for years. Downright good sort of chap too, Jane. He's a business man, and we talked a lot together, he and I. And he gave me one or two very valuable hints which I'm going to talk over with the firm when I get back."

Nothing was said about Elizabeth; no mention of her name passed his lips. And Jane was much too careful to bring up so delicate and so dangerous a subject.

At the same time there were occasions when Mrs. O'Malley, and Hester too, spoke openly about this beautiful young creature who had acted so wrongly. Hester, in particular, was worried.

"It don't seem right, miss," she said sometimes to Jane. "I mean it don't seem right as we don't none of us get in touch with her. I've got a feeling somehow that she wants us, or will want us, and I guess that's what's at the back of the Countess's mind all the time. You see, she hadn't a good word to say for that dreadful man as Miss Elizabeth ran off with. I'm wondering what he's doing; we don't see no mention of him in the papers, do we?"

And so the days went by.

Gerald Briggs went back to London, and looked up Michael, and gave him direct news of his mother, who was distinctly better and had very much benefited by her sojourn in the warm Southern air.

"You'll be having her back pretty soon; she's fretting to get back to her studio once more. She has been painting a little too . . . she's made a portrait of Hester. A wonderful bit of work too," said Gerald. "I believe she is going to send it to some exhibition in Paris."

And so the months went by, and still there was no mention of what was happening to Elizabeth: no sign from her, not even gossip as to what was passing between her and the man she had married.

The anniversary of that dreadful time came and went. It seemed to leave Gerald Briggs unmoved. He showed no sign of realizing all that had happened to him a year before. On the contrary he was settling down into a thorough business man, showing in a queer kind of way signs of having inherited a good deal of his father's acumen.

It was to Hester that the Countess Ninetti wrote announcing that she and Mr. Oppenshaw were going to be married, and that they were coming to England in the autumn.

"I am really very tired," she said. "I have had a great success, people have been awfully good to me, and I know that they are sincere when they entreat me not to leave the stage. But after all I have the horror of an old woman clinging on too long, and moreover I am in need of rest, and my health is not too good. So I have at last agreed to marry Franklin

Oppenshaw, and he's going to bring me to England just for a short visit, and then we think of going out to India for the winter."

This news came at a time when two important events happened.

The first was that Hester Slayde made an appointment with Michael Pannister to meet her at the office of the lawyers who had always attended to his grandmother's business, and who had drawn up her will.

He went there a little perplexed as to what was in Hester's mind, and when he got there he had to sit down and comfort her, for Hester was in tears.

"Oh my, Mr. Michael, you don't know how hard it's been for me not to tell you nothing! But I gave her ladyship my word of honour as I'd say nothing for a year, and I've kept my word, my dear. And now you're going to be told the truth."

And the truth was that old Lady Pannister had only left the money to Hester for the space of one year, during which time she desired it to be made known that beyond the one thousand pounds legacy there was nothing her grandson had to expect from her, and the reason that she had done this was that she did not want him to commit the folly of making Elizabeth Charlbury his wife.

"You see, Mr. Michael," Hester said, as she wiped away her tears, "I did take upon myself—yes, I was that bold, sir—as to plead with her ladyship because I was pretty sure as you did love Miss Elizabeth then, and it wasn't right to stand between you and your happiness. But she was firm. She said as she knew all there was to know about Miss Charlbury; and quite apart from that there was that old wound to be remembered (and it seems that she had never forgiven herself for what she did to my poor mistress, Miss Sophia Martingate), and so it was as she didn't want you to start out with a big mistake. I was to keep the money, you see, for one twelve-month, and it is more than a twelve-month since her ladyship died. And now you are coming into your own fortune, and her ladyship said as you was to share things with your mother. You see it was her ladyship's belief as you was bound to turn out well, Mr. Michael, as you have done. And I am quite, quite sure, too, she was real sorry she had been so bitter against your dear mother."

That was one great important event. And when it was told to Marcella O'Malley, she broke down and cried.

"I don't care a pin about the money, but I do care about the thought. I do care to feel that at the very last she didn't hate me, Michael, and that she was always fond of you."

The other important event was something that happened to Gerald Briggs. He had dropped out entirely from the night club set in which he had been so prominent, and it therefore was with great surprise that he got a letter addressed to him at one of these clubs, which had been forwarded on to him at the big town house which he and Jane shared together as their home in London.

When he opened this letter, there was a sheet of notepaper with no address, but inside there was a draft on a bank in London for no less than £25,000. And on the sheet of paper was written:

"More money will be forwarded to you later on."

The writing was in the hand of Elizabeth.

For a long time Gerald sat holding that piece of paper in his hand, and studying the draft which brought back to him so strangely a part of the money he had given to the woman he loved.

Instead of going to Jane, he went to Michael Pannister.

"What do you make of it?" he asked in a low voice. "You see the postmark is Paris. Do you suppose she's there, Michael?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't tell you, Jerry," he said. "But you've got to be glad, my dear fellow. After all, this proves that Elizabeth has a conscience, if she hasn't got a heart."

Just for an instant Gerald Briggs did not answer. He had gone to the City, and he was in the little office which Michael occupied alone. He stood and stared out of the window to the busy scene below.

"That's what it says to you, Michael," he said. "To me there's another meaning. I'm afraid"—his voice trembled a little—"I hate to think it—but I'm afraid she must be dreadfully unhappy! Oh, my God! I wish I knew where she was! I'd go to her . . . I'd be willing to give all I possess if I only knew where Elizabeth is! Something has happened, you know. I am perfectly convinced she's not with Querita. There's a whole tragedy somehow wrapped up in this, Michael."

Gerald Briggs covered his face with his hands, and then he looked up: his eyes were full of tears.

"It's no use," he said. "I dare say I'm a fool! Jane would say I was, but I did love her, and I love her still. You thought you loved her, but she wasn't the same to you as she was to me."

Then he gave a little nod of his head and he went away.

And Michael sat a little while thinking how he could be of use and help, not only to the boy who had just gone, but to Elizabeth, for now he felt, as Gerald felt, that there was some tragedy attached to her.

It was not until much later in the year that light was forthcoming on the mystery of Elizabeth and her life.

One evening, in a restless fit, Gerald broke through his usual habit and made an appearance at the very club to which Michael had gone that celebrated night (when he had grasped at least the truth that he meant nothing to Elizabeth, and that he was wasting his love on a woman who was not even capable of understanding it). It was on an impulse for which he could not account that Gerald did this.

His old associates were not there, but Gerald was very warmly received by the manager and the waiters, and escorted to a table in a corner. And after a while a certain girl flitted up to the table, and greeted him affectionately.

"Say, Gerald, where do you spring from? Why, you're a sight for sore eyes! My, you do look well! And you've grown too! You don't mind my telling you that, do you?"

He answered with a laugh.

"Why, no," he said. "But you see I've been doing a little bit of travelling since I saw you last."

"Gee!" said the girl, who was an American, "that sounds grand. It's just what you wanted anyway, boy. Well, I'm mighty glad to see you, that I am. May I sit down?"

"Do," said Gerald. "Are you with some friends?"

"Why," the girl answered, "I'm waiting for someone, but I guess I'll have to wait for Chloe; she's never on time, not she. She's someone new. You've never met her. She's a dancer, and a film artist."

"Oh," said Gerald Briggs quietly. "Well, anyway, sit down, and we'll

have some dinner until she comes. And now tell me all your news . . . what you have been doing, and what all the others have been doing."

"Well, I'll give you this news, Jerry boy. We've missed you, and that's the truth. I don't mind telling you that we all pretty nearly put up the shutters when you didn't come back! Are you going to take us all on again?"

He shook his head.

"No. I'm through with all this. I just came in, I don't know why, but I had a sort of feeling I'd like to come in just for once."

"Well, that was a mighty good kind of a hunch to have," said the girl. "And now we'll start to eat, and when Chloe comes we'll have a second dinner. I've got a real fine appetite."

Whilst she was chatting on, the thought was turning round and round in Gerald's mind whether he could safely introduce the subject of Querita. The money which he had received in that mysterious way remained untouched, the draft had never been presented. But his eagerness to know something of what was passing with Elizabeth, his anxiety about the girl was so acute, that he determined before the evening came to a close that he would try at least to obtain some idea as to what was passing with her.

Even while this thought was forming itself in his mind, his companion introduced the subject.

"Say Jerry," she said. "You know that was a low-down deal that our beautiful young Miss Charlbury gave you! It strikes me she paid for it, and pretty swiftly too. Why, what do you think? I guess you hadn't really got any good opinion of Querita, had you? If you had, you were more soft than I took you for. He was a bad man all right. I'll tell the world there was never a worse one. Say, boy, what do you know? He was a married man. Chloe told me all about it. Yes, sir, he was married all right to a little Mexican girl. Seems he chucked her right away, but she stuck on to her marriage lines because . . . well there was a child, too. And what do you suppose happened when our dear Elizabeth got on to that? I guess the sparks flew some!"

Gerald Briggs had turned very white, and he was trembling from head to foot. "Are you telling me a story, Maimie?" he said, "or are you giving me the truth?"

She gave him one glance, and then she did not look again.

"Say, I'm real sorry," she said. "I didn't ought to have spoken to you like that. I guess you won't forgive me in a hurry."

"On the contrary," said young Briggs, though his voice was hoarse and broken, he spoke with a certain amount of dignity, "I am very grateful to you. I have been most anxious to get at some truth about this business. I was beginning to realize we were up against a pretty rotten thing in Querita, but I tried not to believe the worst of him."

"Why, he's just as rotten as he can be," the girl called Maimie answered. Then she started up to her feet. "Say, there's Chloe. Would you like to meet her? Why, come right over to our table and we'll have the whole thing talked out. Chloe knows a thing or two about Querita."

"I want to know where he is," said Gerald, and now he spoke in a terse and a tense voice and he shook from head to foot.

The girl looked at him very quickly.

"Why, say, Jerry," she said. "You mustn't look like that. Why, say, he isn't worth it! He's a snake, that's what he is! You don't want to have

anything to do with a man like that. Why, say, Jerry, you mustn't put murder in your thoughts."

"There's something that's got to be said between us," said Gerald Briggs. "But I'm not going to murder him, not right away. I am only going to get the truth out of him about Elizabeth . . . and I'll make him tell me that truth if I have to squeeze the life out of him!"

He paused just to give some order to the waiter, and the girl rushed forward to her friend.

She spoke with great rapidity.

"Now see here, Chloe, this guy that's coming over to have dinner with us, he's a real good sort . . . his name's Gerald Briggs. And he's all out to know something about Querita. You see Querita was the fellow that ran away with his girl, and she got fifty thousand pounds out of this boy. He's tuned up to opera pitch, so go carefully. He's out to murder Querita, that's what he's crazy to do, and I'll tell the world he's far too good to put his neck in danger."

The other girl looked at her, and then looked across the room to where Gerald Briggs was standing.

"That's all right, kid," she said. "You leave it to me. Querita ought to be murdered sure enough, but we'll let some other chap do the killing."

And the next moment she was smiling up into Gerald Briggs' face and inviting him most cordially to sit at her table.

Chapter XXIII

When it became known that Paulina Amati had resolved to give up the stage and retire, there was a perfect outburst of protest in the newspapers, not only of England and America, but of all the world.

And though she stood very firmly in her determination and refused to be bribed by most marvellous offers, it cost the actress a great deal to fall back from the place which she had filled so splendidly, and drift into private life.

Her last performance in New York was memorable. The theatre could have been filled four or five times over. Her floral offerings were so numerous that there was no place to put them. She was called again, and again, and again, and she had to make a speech. And she looked so beautiful, and yet so fragile, and so pathetic as she stood surrounded by her company that there was scarcely a dry eye in the audience.

In fact, when she got back in her dressing-room (having at last been allowed to get there), she collapsed. And her faithful maid and her devoted friend and future husband were terribly concerned about her.

After a while they managed to restore her to something like consciousness, and then a word was sent out to the stage door to ask the people who were waiting there if they would be so very good as to let her go away quietly as she was really prostrated and unfit for any more excitement or emotion. Her maid took this message to the stage door. And when they were alone, the actress stretched her hands out to Oppenshaw.

"Franklin," she said. "I know you will think I am crazy, but—but, Franklin, my child was in front to-night! Yes, I saw her, and she was

crying. Oh, Franklin, I *must* see her! Oh, my dear, you must find Elizabeth for me! She has changed . . . she looked so ill, so thin; something terrible has happened to her, as I knew it would. Oh, my dear, do try and find her for me! Perhaps—perhaps," the Countess said, "she is standing amongst the crowd at the stage door. Will you go and see?"

He comforted her with kind words, and then he hurried to obey her.

The stage door-keeper was just announcing to the crowd that Paulina Amati was so broken with all that had happened that night that it would be the kindest thing possible to let her go quietly to her carriage and not give her any further demonstration of their love and their homage.

The crowd was disappointed, and did not seem inclined to obey. And as Franklin Oppenshaw stood behind the stage door-keeper, he looked eagerly into the crowd of faces, but he could see no one in the least degree resembling Elizabeth. He hated to go back and carry this news, but he watched until some of them began to melt away, and the crowd grew less, and yet he could see nothing of that beautiful young creature who he knew was so dear to the heart of the woman he loved.

And yet though he did not see her, Elizabeth was there! She was standing on the outskirts of the crowd.

It was not the first time she had seen her mother act. Of late she had gone frequently to the theatre, and each time she had realized the pathos, the beauty, the genius of the woman whose child she was, and each time she had gone back to her modest lodgings and had wept bitterly through the long hours.

This night, as she stood among the throng of excited, shouting people, she sent a kind of unspoken call to the heart of her mother. It was a pathetic and almost an unconscious call, for Elizabeth now realized how much she had need of the love and the tenderness she had pushed from her so definitely and with so much scorn.

She was shabbily dressed, and had grown almost a shadow of her former self. On the table of the room which was called her home was spread a great number of manuscripts and papers. The only way in which she could earn money was to carry on the work which she had once helped her father to do. She had abandoned all thoughts of doing anything with these manuscripts when she had found herself so comfortably placed in London; but when tragedy and horror had fallen upon her, and she had realized how low she had sunk she had only one thing that gave her a sense of comfort, and that was the fact that she had managed to save the major portion of the money which Gerald Briggs had given her from the clutches of the man with whom she had run away. Needless to say, almost at once Querita had demanded to be given full control of this money, but Elizabeth had refused to fall in with his wishes. She had, however, advanced him from time to time large sums until he had swallowed the half of the fortune. It had not taken Elizabeth very long to realize that this man (who for a short spell had exercised a kind of physical spell over her) was coarse, violent in his passions, common and dangerous.

And when the news was brought to her that she was not his wife, that he was a married man, and she had taxed him with this and he had only laughed in her face, and snapped his fingers at her, Elizabeth nearly died. In the realization of her degradation and her utter misery she had slipped away from him, leaving no trace of where she had gone.

It was not until some months afterwards that she plucked up the courage

to send back such money as was lodged in the bank in her name to Gerald Briggs. How she would ever get together the other half of what he had given her was something she didn't know. But she determined with passion, and with pride, and with anguish of heart, that by every means in her power she would get this money together somehow, and at least wipe out the ugliest part of her treatment of a poor and a foolish boy.

As she stood on the edge of the crowd outside the stage door, she caught sight of Franklin Oppenshaw, and she shrank back into the darkness. She had intended to wait there until her mother came out, but now that was impossible. She could not bear to feel that she would have to stand by and see that mother go past her like an utter stranger.

At the same time it was utterly impossible for her to make any advance. Not that she doubted the outcome of that, only that she had a sense of utter shame when she realized how badly she had acted, and what a blow she must have struck at that mother's heart when she did what she had done.

She had been in Paris when she posted that money to Gerald Briggs. It was in Italy that the truth of Querita's position had been brought to her through the jealousy of another woman, a film actress with whom he was carrying on a very pronounced intrigue. And when it was brought home to Elizabeth that she had not even the right to call herself this man's wife, she slipped away from him, and lived for a time in complete seclusion in Paris.

From there she put herself into communication with various publishers with whom her father had once been in treaty, and as two of them were in New York, she resolved to go to America. Perhaps there was unconsciously an urge in her heart to go somewhere near where her mother was?

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, Elizabeth would have been frantically jealous at the adulation which was lavished on Paulina Amati but she seemed to have grown out of all her former callous and bitter feelings, and in fact, she was too weary, too humiliated, and too desperately distressed to let these ugly thoughts have sway with her.

As far as Querita himself was concerned, she wanted to put the whole world between herself and him. She had managed to carry away with her a certain amount of the jewellery Gerald Briggs had given her. Looking back she found herself wondering at the strength of character which had given her power to stand against Querita, and keep as much of the property as possible in her own hands.

In Paris she had tried to obtain a certain amount of money on the jewellery, but common sense advised her that she would do far better by selling these valuables when she got to America than she would in France.

To begin with, her position was very difficult. She was so poor, and because of this she was afraid it might be considered very strange that she should be in possession of so much valuable jewellery when she had to live so humbly. She felt in this that she needed some help, and that night in New York as she turned away from the crowd assembled outside the stage door, and disappeared into the darkness, the thought came to her that if she were to approach Oppenshaw, he would most assuredly give her the practical advice she needed.

But to do this would be to bring her in close contact with her mother, and much as she longed for the love and care, and tenderness which she knew would be lavished upon her, she still shrank from approaching that mother now that she was so broken and her life was so changed.

She walked back to her lodgings and shed many bitter tears as she went,

and she let herself wearily into the house where she lived, eager to be alone in the only place that she could call her home, there to weep out her heart unrestrainedly.

. . . .

The news about Lady Pannister's disposition of her money gave Jane Briggs feelings of happiness, and yet of depression. She felt that this divided Michael from her still more surely.

And when one day her brother came to her and told her that he was going off again to America, she startled him with the suggestion that she would like to go with him.

The young man looked at her with rather a curious expression. He wondered if by any chance she had guessed at what was forming in his mind. It was a passionate determination to come into close quarters with Querita, not to punish him but to get at the truth as to what was happening to Elizabeth.

Then when he looked at his sister, and he saw that Jane's bright, brisk expression had changed considerably of late, Gerald Briggs told himself that he must put his own feelings on one side, and minister to her.

He had many letters from the Countess, who was now married to Franklin Oppenshaw, and in all these letters she told him that she had abandoned her intention of coming to England, or even of going out to the East, because there was a reason why she wished to stay in New York, or at least in America.

"We are thinking of buying a big property not very far from the City," she told him. "I believe I am very tired of travelling, and my man must attend to his business, which is very important. So to his great delight, although of course he would go to the other end of the world with me if I wanted to go, I have decided to settle down here. After all, he has been such a wonderful friend, and so devoted to me all these years I feel I must study him. And, moreover, I am very glad, dear Jerry, to be at rest in my own home. After so many hotels and travels, there is a great charm in having a home."

When she wrote this letter her pen was almost tempted to give the full truth to young Briggs, but she refrained. If she had told him the truth she would have confessed that her real reason for staying in America was because she was convinced that Elizabeth was in New York, and she could not bring herself to go away far from the city while there was a possibility of her coming in touch with her child.

There was a little outcry on the part of Mrs. O'Malley when Jane declared that she was going to America with her brother.

Michael said nothing, but on the morning they caught the early boat train to Southampton, he was at the station, and to her surprise he told her that he was going down with her to see her safely on board.

Consequently it was a very pleasant journey, even though the morning was chilly, and a parting was close at hand. Gerald Briggs had engaged a suite of rooms for his sister, and flowers had already been arranged in it.

It was in this flower-decked sitting-room on board the big liner that Michael spoke out that which had been pressing on his heart all through the year.

"You know I hate you going across the Atlantic," he said, and then he added, "without me."

A little colour crept into Jane's cheeks; she was looking very pretty, and very smartly dressed.

"But, Micky," she said (she had grown into the habit of calling him by his mother's pet name), "I am not going away for ever."

"No, that you certainly are not!" the young man answered. "I can tell you that's pretty certain. Why, what *do* you suppose we should do without you, Jane?"

Jane laughed a little nervously.

"Well, my dear, there are others, aren't there?"

And his reply was:

"There's only one Jane, and according to my mother, she's the dearest thing on earth. Of course I found that out for myself a long time ago when poor Gran was alive and I used to go to the cottage. What I want to know, Miss Jane Briggs, is this: Why have you changed to me in the last few months? I had grown to believe we were the best of friends, but somehow or other you seem to have been slipping away from me."

"Look here, Michael," said Jane Briggs, and she spoke in her frank, straightforward way, "I'm frightfully fond of you, but I don't care to butt in on any other person's life."

Michael went up to her, and took her by the two shoulders and turned her round.

"What do you mean by that? What have you got in your mind? Oh! I know you have something mysterious working in your mind; I told mother that yesterday."

Jane's head drooped a little, and her face grew pale.

"Michael," she said, "I am more or less a new comer in your life, but Judith——"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I knew it! And so did mother. . . . We both came to the conclusion that you had been putting silly ideas into your head. Why, my dear child, hasn't Judith told you herself? She is going to be married in the early part of the year to young Cobden, her father's junior. Jolly clever chap, too, and Sir Henry's frightfully pleased about it."

"I haven't seen Judith for a little while," Jane answered; but now her cheeks were full of colour, and she lifted her head. "You are not making this up, are you, Michael?" she asked in her blunt way.

"Good Lord, no!" said Michael Pannister. "Making it up, I should think not! What I am going to do is this."

He just put his arms all round Jane, held her very tightly in those arms, and then he kissed her a great many times.

"Now you belong to me," he said, "because I am perfectly convinced that you are not the sort of person who allows herself to be kissed promiscuously." And then his tone changed. "Why, Jane, don't you realize, there is nothing in the world so dear to me, except my mother, as you? I have had my lesson, my dear. I chased a butterfly, as the Countess told me very straightforwardly, and in chasing her I fell and hurt myself. But there isn't a scar left, and the only thing that has kept me going and has bucked me up and pointed the way to work and success has been you. Now, what are you going to say about that?"

But Jane did not answer him in words. She just simply snuggled up to him, and as he bent over her, she kissed him very softly.

And Gerald Briggs coming in at that moment turned round very gently, and left them together.

Chapter XXIV

It was after all by the simplest of simple chances that Elizabeth was found.

Jane and her brother had been in New York about ten days. They spent a great part of their time in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Oppenshaw, and they had of course been driven out to inspect the wonderful house which, having come into the market unexpectedly, had been bought by Oppenshaw as his American home.

To the girl, Elizabeth's mother opened her heart and told the truth.

"I don't want to make your brother unhappy, but really I must tell you, Jane, I *can't* go away from here! I am simply held as it were by a strong magnet. I am convinced that Elizabeth is in New York! My dear, I have thought of every possible way in which I could get in touch with her, but I can find none. She must be so dreadfully unhappy, and she certainly is alone."

"Now I'll tell you something," Jane said in her sharp way, "and that is that the same idea has come to Jerry, I mean that she is over here. Now I know why he disappears for days at a time, and wanders about the streets, and goes here, there and everywhere on the chance of coming across some clue as to where Elizabeth is. You know he heard a lot about Querita, and I have been terrified that he was going to follow up this man, and that there would be a dreadful quarrel, and perhaps a terrible scandal. But since he has come to New York, his whole thought seems to be on finding Elizabeth, and he's put it in his mind, just as you have, that she *is* to be found, and here where we all are. Well," said Jane, "I'll do all in my power. Of course she behaved abominably! But still we've got to forget all that, because I think she must have suffered terribly. You know she never was Querita's wife?"

"I guessed as much," was the answer, "because I had good reason to doubt the man. I very quickly realized that it was only the money that tempted him. How Elizabeth could have lost her head about him amazes me! Because you see, Jane, with all her peculiar faults, she was so utterly different from Querita, and there was great pride in her."

That very day when Jane motored back from her visit to the Oppenshaws to meet her brother at the hotel, she found him in a state of great excitement.

"I want you to come out with me, Jenny," he said, calling her by a name which he had not used for years. "I'm sure I've tumbled on to some clue as to where Elizabeth is."

He led her through the streets until he came to a certain little antique sort of shop where, amongst the things displayed in the window, was a very wonderfully carved green stone in the shape of a pendant on an old chain.

"You don't know it, sis," he said, "but I gave that to Elizabeth. It cost—well, it cost far more than I care to remember now because I don't believe it was worth all that money. But she loved it, and she used to wear it. It's an emerald and Elizabeth must have sold it . . . she must be selling all that I gave her to get back the money she wants to return to me. Oh, Jenny dear, we've just *got* to find her!"

"Come right in," said Jane.

She asked straight away to look at the emerald pendant, and as the man in attendance put it in her hand, she said:

and she i... pardon I hav... asked, and I must be a
more trouler. I want to be married with Hester beside me. Will you
"We are i...
find her. She's... was to kiss her hands.
needs care, and we... ...er Franklin Oppenshaw and his wife and his step-
more trouble if you l... Briggs in close attendance, sailed from New York
With just a little furthe... first person to greet them, as they came down
and then he came back with a... was Hester Slayde. She had been brought
"It's a poor neighbourhood," he...
to keep her jewellery in such a place. As a...
pieces here under inspection for us to give her... Hester stood very still.
this emerald was a gift from you? Can you describe any ot... ...so unlike
jewellery belonging to this lady?"

"There was a very big square emerald ring set with diamonds," said Gerald Briggs. "And there was a long chain of alternate diamonds and emeralds finished with a very wonderful tassel. There was also an old bracelet, all picked diamonds, with an 'E' in the centre formed by the jewels because that lady's christian name began with 'E.'"

The man behind the counter smiled at Gerald Briggs.

"That's enough, sir. I quite understand. You will find this young lady at that address."

When they were out in the street, Jane put her hand through her brother's arm.

"See here, Jerry," she said, "do you want me to come with you? See, I was not too good and kind to Elizabeth. I'm sure you'll do it far better by yourself."

"No, you've got to come with me," said Gerald Briggs. "She may get frightened when she sees me, I don't want her to be frightened; I want her to turn to me. Look here, Jenny, if she'll have me, I am going to marry her. I'm going to take her out of all this trouble, and shame, and humiliation that has been put upon her. I did hate her just for a little while, but it was not real hate because I've just got the feeling I can't live without her."

"I understand," said Jane softly, and she pressed her hand against her heart where there reposed a long letter, and a cable which had reached her that morning from Michael Pannister.

. . . .

Elizabeth was working closely at an article which she was writing, taken from a number of notes which she had found amongst her father's papers. It would bring her in a few dollars. If she had allowed her father's name to be used, it would have signified a good deal more money; but she was determined not to make use of her father's name, and that all honour and merit was to come to him direct, and not through her.

The autumn had passed, and winter was coming near. Her room was very

Chapter XXIV

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Jane and her brother had been in New York about ten day or two of t

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Oppenshaw, and they had of course been driven out to, Elizabeth started

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by Oppenshaw as his American home.

To the girl, Elizabeth's mother opened he t frightened. I want y

“I don't want to make your brothe real friend, Elizabeth. And I

Jane, I *can't* go away from her been unkind or harsh to you.”

magnet. I ... staring at her. She looked like a beautiful

“I don't understand,” she said in her low voice. “I . . . you

have nothing to forgive you . . . it is I who must ask for forgiveness.

As she said these words, she sank down in her chair and covered her with her hands.

The next moment Gerald Briggs had pushed by his sister and was kneeli beside her. He was pleading with her passionately, and yet with a voic full of love.

“Oh, Elizabeth, please don't cry . . . oh! my dear . . . my dear . . don't turn away from us. We are so happy we have found you. Where . . . I . . . Oh, Elizabeth, I love you! I have always loved you. I . . . you *must* not turn away from us.”

There were tears streaming down Jane Briggs' face, and she turned and went out of the room, closing the door gently behind her.

And as she did so, Gerald Briggs got on to his feet again and just took Elizabeth in his arms.

“You are going to belong to me,” he said boldly. “I am a changed man, Elizabeth. You did me the greatest good that any being could do to another. You have made a man of me . . . and it's as a man I ask you to be my wife? . . . To give me such happiness as I have almost despaired of ever possessing? I honour you, Elizabeth. I worship you . . . I love you!”

. . . .

For a few weeks Elizabeth Charlbury lay very ill, almost unconscio She had been conveyed to her mother's hotel because the big house was yet ready for its new mistress, and there she had been nursed with every everything that money and tender love could lavish upon her.

And little by little she came back to life again. To life, and to the awakening that life had something very wonderful to hold for her, and that though she had fallen so low in her own estimation, love (a mother's love, and the love of the man who was going to be her husband) had lifted her up again and put her once more in her proper place among honourable and devoted people.

Jane Briggs had gone back across the Atlantic, and the day that Elizabeth

s ... pardon I have ... asked, and I must be a
with her. I want to be married with Hester beside me. Will you
?"

only answer was to kiss her hands.

a fortnight later Franklin Oppenshaw and his wife and his step-
r, with Gerald Briggs in close attendance, sailed from New York
ampton. And the first person to greet them, as they came down
ay to the Customs, was Hester Slayde. She had been brought
a cable from Gerald Briggs.

e be at Southampton to meet us."

saw Elizabeth coming down the gangway, Hester stood very still.
d straight in the eyes of the beautiful girl, so like, and yet so unlike
beth who had come to her that bygone day, and before she was
the others, she found herself being kissed by Elizabeth and held
ntly in the girl's arms.

neither of them spoke; it was a moment fraught with too much
on. But if ever there was a happy woman that cold, bright day, that
n was Hester Slayde as she sat with her hand held in Elizabeth's and
elled up to London.

hree days later Gerald Briggs and Elizabeth Charlbury were married,
it was Hester Slayde who gave the bride away.

THE END

Chapter XXIV

A Mating in t...
The Law of the Hills.
Behind the Ranges.
A Sin of Silence.
The Lady of North Star.
The Lifting of the Shadow.
The White Hands of Justice.
The Mystery of the Heart.
Where the Aurora Flames.
An Adventurer of the Bay.

BEN BOLT.

Captain Lucifer.
The Sword of Fortune.
The Badge.
The Jewels of Sin.
The Impossible Lover.
The Buccaneer's Bride.
The Diamond-Buckled Shoe.

MARJORIE BOWEN.

Lovers' Knots.

MARCUS CLARKE.

For the Term of His Natural Life.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

Married for Her Beauty.

J. S. FLETCHER.

Ravensdene Court.
Lynne Court Spinney.
The Ambitious Lady.
The Talleyrand Maxim.
The Middle Temple Murder.

HEADON HILL.

The Cliff Path Mystery.
The Broken Seal.
My Lord the Felon.
Sir Vincent's Patient.

JOSEPH HOCKING.

The Prince of this World.
God and Mammon.
An Enemy Hath Done This.
Jabez Easterbrook.

HARRY STEPHEN KEELER.

The Amazing Web.

MARIE CONNOR LEIGHTON.

The Harvest of Sin.
Deep Waters.
The Fires of Love.
Justice.

L. C. MOBERLY.

Vere.
A Tangled Web.

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM.

The Master Mummer.
Berenice.
The Peer and the Woman.
A Monk of Cruta.
False Evidence.
The Conspirators.
The Betrayal.
Jeanne of the Marshes.
A Maker of History.
A Lost Leader.
Anna the Adventuress.
Mr. Wingrave, Mill...
The Prince of Sinners.

WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

The Young Archduchess.
The Marked Man.
Three Knots.
In White Raiment.
The Sign of Silence.
The Place of Dragons.
The House of Evil.
The Temptress.
A Maker of Secrets.
Guilty Bonds.

EFFIE ...

Carlton's Wife.
The Rose of Life.
The Flame of Love.
Out of a Clear Sky.
The Man She Loved.
A Girl with a Heart.
In Love's Land.
They Laugh That Win.
Money or Wife?
Sunset and Dawn.
Young Hearts.
Through Weal and Through Woe.
Sunlight Beyond.
The Game of Life.
Love's Young Dream.
Lights and Shadows.

JESSE TEMPLETON.

Clayface.

LOUIS TRACY.

The House Round the Corner.
The Pillar of Light.

PAUL TRENT.

Churstons.
The Red Streak.
The Ruling Vice.
Mark Ryder's Vow.
A Legacy of Vengeance.
Max Logan.
The Bush King.
The Second Chance.
A Woman of Action.
The Strange Inheritance.
Her Wild Oats.
The Unexpected Daughter.

JOHN H. VAHEY.

Mr. Nemesis.

VALENTINE.

One Good Turn.
A Flight to a Finish.
The Blue Pool.

E. CHAS. VIVIAN.

The Tale of Fleur.
Woman Dominant.
Nine Days.

EDGAR WALLACE.

Grey Timothy.
Mr. Justice Maxell.
Bones.
The Admirable Carfew.
The Council of Justice.
The Just Men of Cordova.
Chick.
The Book of all Power.
The Nine Bears.
The Fourth Plague.
Kate, Plus Ten.
Down Under Donovan.
Private Selby.
The River of Stars.
The Adventures of Heine.
The Duke in the Suburbs.
The Man Who Bought London.
A Debt Discharged.
The Man Who Was Nobody.
Bones in London.
The Daffodil Mystery.
The Secret House.
The Three Oak Mystery.
The Green Rust.
The Books of Bart.
Those Folk of Bulboro.

FRED M. WHITE.

The Cardinal Moth.
The Brand of Silence.